

Civil Rights History Project
Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program
under contract to the
Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture
and the Library of Congress, 2015

Interviewee: Julius W. Becton

Interview Date: December 15, 2015

Location: Unknown

Interviewer: David Cline

Videographer: John Bishop

Length: approximately 3 hours, 10 minutes

START OF RECORDING

Female 1: From the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

DC: Are you ready, sir?

JB: Sure. As best I can be.

DC: All right. Well, good morning. Today is December 15, 2015, this is David Cline from the history department at Virginia Tech, also working with the Southern Oral History Program at UNC-Chapel Hill, and we are here this morning as part of the Civil Rights History Project of the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, and the Southern Oral History Program. And I have the great honor of being with General Julius Becton this morning, and if you could just introduce yourself, and--this is the only time I'll script you at all--a full sentence to start with, "I am," or that "My name is."

JB: I'm Julius Wesley Becton, Jr., Lieutenant General in the United States Army, retired.

DC: Thank you.

JB: Happy.

DC: [Laughter] Happy. Thank you, sir. So it, let's just, if we start with y-- the, where you were born and raised, and a little bit about your family, and then we'll have a conversation, take it from there.

JB: Okay. I was born in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, I went to high school--at Lower Merion High School, I just point that out because there are a few rather prominent graduates of Lower Merion. The Librarian of Congress, as an example, Jim Billington; Al Haig, of some notoriety; Hap Arnold, the former commander of the Air Force, then Army Air Corps. If you live here in Washington, yeah. The anchor on channel four is a graduate of Lower Merion, and we have other, some prominent citizens. Kobe Bryant, some people have never heard of him, I understand he's retiring this year. So--

DC: That's right.

JB: --we have that kind of program, we have some outstanding academics. At one time, Lower Merion was in the top ten of the high schools in the country, and they're still very high now, and have a great reputation. I'm happy to say that I got out of that place, did well.

DC: And this is what they call the Main Line, right?

JB: The Main Line of Philadelphia. It's supposed to be--not supposed to be. It's a very ritzy and well-to-do--I was born there because my father was a janitor in an apartment. And we lived in the basement of the apartment, and it's a block and a half

from Bryn Mawr College. And two blocks from Bryn Mawr train station, that goes out from Philadelphia. It's a very--other schools, Rosemont, Villanova, Haverford, Swarthmore--just some of the schools that are in that area. So I grew up in an academic field.

DC: And what were the sort of restraints or boundaries of race and class in that area, as you were growing up?

JB: It was part of the segregation areas. However, the schools were not segregated. We could not go into certain restaurants, or could not--we'd go to the theater, we were required to sit down in front rows. And if they were filled, we just--depended how much the film had been going, we could member--mingle with the other folks, they wouldn't, no one complained about it. But it was segregated. We're talking, now, back in the [19]20s and [19]30s. It took some time to get through all of those things.

DC: And so you went, you had your high school years there, and--

JB: High school years. Lower Merion is located in Ardmore, Pennsylvania. It's a township. There were very few things we could not do. We could not participate in the swimming program. I do not remember, in the four years I was in high school, counting ninth grade, having gone to a prom. It wasn't encouraged, so we didn't bother doing it. As far as the schools were concerned, academically, we were encouraged to do the best we could. I happened to be a member of the student council. The president of my class, we started kindergarten together, and he'll be invited to my birthday party, we go back that far.

DC: Wonderful. So, after high school?

JB: After high school, I joined the Army Air Corps enlisted reserves, while a senior at high-- at Lower Merion. And when I was, after I graduated, I came on active duty.

DC: And what year was this?

JB: Nineteen forty-four, when I came on active duty. My first duty station [5:00] was Biloxi, Mississippi, Keesler Air Force Base. As I sometimes say with tongue in cheek, a great place for young black, eighteen years old, to go to in those times. And taking the physical examination for flight school, I flunked the eyes test. I had astigmatism. I knew I had that problem, but when I walked into my testing in every other place, they had a big chart on the wall, big E and then scale down. In those days, I could take one look at that chart, and I had it memorized. Front, back, either way. They would say, "Okay, cover your right eye." Covered my right. "Cover left eye," fine. I got down to Keesler Field, new machine technology. In a darkened room with a machine right back here, and you walk in. I don't see any chart. Room's dark. They pushed a button, chart comes up. I had no chance, I--I flunked the test. And that sent me off to MacDill Field, which was an Army Aviation Facility, engineer. Excuse me.

DC: What had you been hoping you might be able to do?

JB: I wanted to become a pilot, in what turned out to be the Tuskegee Airmen--didn't have that name when I was there, but--I wanted to become a pilot because Hap Arnold had come out to our high school and convinced us, "Join the Army Air Corps, win your civil wings and gold bars." And by God, I went down and when we, after he finished his spiel, about half the football team went down to take the battery of tests. Six of us passed, and on the 28th of December, 1943, we all were inducted into the Army Air

Corps enlisted reserves. And that's how I got into the flight program in the first place. After going through New Cumberland--New Cumberland was where the reception station--I went to Keesler Field, my five other buddies went to Florida. Keesler, where they had black Americans; Florida, they did not have. And so. I might add that none of us became pilots, for various reasons. After that, off to MacDill Field Army Avia--Army Engineering.

DC: Well, let me ask, first, though--you know, you said it tongue in cheek. Biloxi, not the best place, perhaps, to be--could you tell us a little bit about what you, the conditions were there?

JB: Well, a good example of the one weekend I took off, with leave, from Keesler Field, a buddy of mine and I went down to Keesler--to Biloxi, rather, from the base. And we're, while walking down the street, we heard some noise coming from the rear. "There are two of them!" And we turned around, here's a pickup truck coming down the pavement, driving at us. We flatten against the walls and they went by, and we thought, "It may be a good idea to get back on post." And so we did. And that was typical treatment. And I point that out because, many years later, I went back to Biloxi, I am now a lieutenant general in the United States Army, I was invited by the National Guard of Mississippi, I was greeted by the adjutant general, I flew in in my own aircraft--the Army's aircraft, rather, which I controlled--I was greeted by this AG, we went from the airfield to a small camp that they had, and I forget the name of the base, or of the camp, rather, spent the night there, and then we drove to the hotel where they had a meeting of National Guard and Reserves, for which I was to speak to. And I, my first comment, "My, how things have changed." And I explained what I was talking about.

“The last time I was down here, let me tell you what happened to me.” And of course all of them knew and understood what I, exactly what I was talking about. I had state trooper escort from the airport, to this camp, to the hotel. Left in great fashion. But that was a significant change. Still was not the best, at that time, but it was a hell of a lot better than when I was first there.

DC: What were the barracks like in 1944? [10:00]

JB: They're wooden buildings, two-story, just like everyone up, but we were separated from the rest of the posts. Controlled by the camp--my company commander was a white first lieutenant, he had a white exec, and the rest were black. First sergeant, the rest of the cadre. As a matter of fact, it was there, after I--when I got down to MacDill, when, on an aviation engineering until, and with the same setup, basically, structure. The first sergeant had been, was told by the company exec that he's heard that there's an announcement for, applications for OCS. And that fellow, Becton, understand, was an aviation cadet, he might be interested. By that time I had become the first sergeant's clerk. How did I become his clerk? One very wet day, the first sergeant came out and said, “Okay. I need a clerk, I need a volunteer. Who can type?” I had typing as a club, put my hand up, he said, “Okay. Come here, let's go in.” Went into the first sergeant's office, I found out that the first sergeant had a little problem. My job was to read the company roster to him, the company roster, because he could not read. And he had it memorized, basically, and he would get up in front of the company, and put that paper up, and call the roll.

DC: As if he were reading, right.

JB: That's the kind of stories--army we had at that time. And because I was able to type and help him, "You're my clerk." "Yes, First Sergeant." And when his lieutenant came back from post and said, "There's a roster, there's a campaign or statement on a board, bulletin board at post, that are going to be an OCS application board, you might, Becton might be interested." First sergeant came in and said, "You're going to go down and take a test." "You're going to go down and appear at that board." "Yes, First Sergeant." I went down--and this is one of the weird things--the president of the board had been through the township of Lower Merion. And when I mentioned that I had gone to Lower Merion, played football there, I had at least one person on my side. And I didn't do poorly, but that made me feel pretty good when I was trying to answer the questions. That's how I started to get my process out of Keesler F--out of Biloxi--wait a minute. Out of MacDill Field, and I passed the OCS test, passed the board, and in January of 1945, I went off to Fort Benning, Infantry OCS. Got there in December, as a matter of fact, of 1944. School started in January of 1945, and I graduated from OCS in August of 1945. Fifteenth of August, as a matter of fact. And interesting part, they had dropped the bomb. And we were destined to go off to become infantry lieutenants, and matter of fact, when Germany quit about April of 1945, we started getting concerned because, hey, they might cut off OCS and whereas, "No, we want to keep OCS going." As a result, when the Japanese dropped it, we said, "Well, we're this close, they wouldn't dare cut out OCS." Now, they didn't and we graduated on the 16th of August, 1945. I was sent off, briefly, to Alabama for basic training duty, and within three weeks I was off to the Pacific.

DC: Wow, yeah. Now, OCS--and this is sort of a quirk--OCS is not, were not segregated, correct?

JB: No. Officer Candidate School. And they had officers' candidate school, and it's designed to fill these voids when they drop off [15:00] sufficient--not, don't have sufficient officers coming out of West Point or ROTCs, and there's still a need for more officers, Officer Candidate School is the group that they turn to.

DC: Right. And that's, but that was an integrated--

JB: That was integrated. When I got there--integrated to a point.

DC: You always have to make () clear.

JB: Once we got inside the officer candidate regiment, we were just like everyone el--every other soldier. Our training, we lived in integrated billets, we got integrated everything. However, you step outside of that regiment area, you're back to the South. You waited in your line to get on a certain bus, even there, going to the theater outside the regent area, you sat at a different location than your fellow candidates. But inside the training itself, completely integrated.

DC: And were there service clubs on the base?

JB: Yes, service clubs in the base, but we went to a black service club, and the white, my white counterparts went to the white service club. Same thing for the officer--officers' club, and--. It was the big, the Southern way of doing business.

DC: Okay. So then, off to the Pacific.

JB: Off to the Pacific, joined the 93rd Infantry Division, all-black division except for the division commander and his key staff. One of the more interesting parts about that, we went overseas on a--well, first let me back up a little bit. Before leaving

the States, I went to a place, staging area, in California. And I'm groping now for the name of it, but it was the place to go from, that staging area, overseas. I met a couple of-- there were about fifteen of us officers, two of them were West Pointers, and we became very good friends while we were en route to the Pacific. So much so that they convinced me, during our transit, if I ever had a chance to go to West Point, I wouldn't do it.

Already had my commission, and I was not about to go through what they had to go through, the silencing treatment and the other things. They also taught me how to shoot crap. Took my money, because they taught me how to shoot crap on a blanket--if you know anything about shooting crap, you, that's the last thing you want to do. And they took my money from that, and I reminded them of that, later, when I had a chance. Went off to the Pacific. The war was just over but there still were--I went to a place called Morotai, which is south of the Philippines, north of New Guinea. There were two divisions on Morotai, the 93rd Division and the Dickson Division. Why the Army ever put those two divisions together, I'll never know. I tried to find out since then, no one has given me a satisfactory answer. But during the fighting, they did very well against the bad guys, the Japanese--keep it in mind, this is a war, now, going on, we're fighting the Japanese--when there were no fighting going on with the Japanese, they fought each other. So much so that I almost pulled out of my regiment, I was in C Company, 1st Battalion, 369th Infantry, and sent on detail to the post marshal, and the Dickson Division had a lieutenant come up and we rode patrols together, to try to make sure, maintain a little bit of peace.

DC: Peace between the two?

JB: Keep in mind, I was a nineteen-year-old second lieutenant, this guy from Dickson was the same age I was so we were two characters, stuck out there.

DC: Driving around in a jeep.

JB: To drive around to keep peace. Another interesting situation.

DC: The Dickson Division flying Confederate flags, and things like this?

JB: Oh, yes. Their Confederate flag as well as their regimental flag. One of my combat activities was, I was required to take a patrol into the hills, and they knew the Japanese were someplace up in the hills, up in the mountains. The war was over so we had a Japanese translator, we went out, I had my platoon, the Japanese translator had a bullhorn, announcing the fact that "War is over, give up, come on, we'll take care of you." For that we got shot at, and we were told not to engage. [20:00] We had weapons to protect ourselves, but "Do not engage." We got shot at, we knew where they were, came back, reported that to battalion commander, he in turn reported it to regimental commander, the regimental commander said, "Hey"--no. The division commander said, "They're up there, we know where they are, we'll just starve them out." That took care of my first combat experience of being shot at. And that went on for a time, to deactivate the division, January of 1946. And if you had a certain number of quality points, promotion or overseas points, you came home. I did not have any of those things, I had just gotten there. So I and a few other folks were sent to the technical services, I went to Manila as a, to a signal unit. And I report in, company, there were six officers, the company commander was a captain, I was the junior lieutenant. The company commander was an infantry officer, the three of the officers were signal officers, and the rest of us were infantry. This was a heavy construction company, the kind of company

that goes out and put up overhead wire and cable. Drilled the holes in the ground, put in the poles, and then string cable. I never drilled a--I'd never been in a signal unit before, but wasn't very much, very difficult, I knew what I had to do. I had a platoon of thirty-odd soldiers, all of them were signal officers, signal soldiers. And they were happy to get a youngster in that could help them with many things, so they taught me how to climb poles, how to go up there and hang wire. We drilled a lot, I taught them how to do that. And I did something the other lieutenants would not do. I'd climb the pole and check it out. We had a chance, on one occasion, to put in poles for--we're talking, now, Manila--for radio or commercial radio, televisions too. And we put in one-hundred-foot poles. To put in a one-hundred-foot pole, you've got to put about ten feet into the ground. Once you get a pole in the ground, now you have to go up and hang the wire. And I didn't have much choice to, were I going to go up or stay down? My soldiers are up hanging wire, I'm going to climb the pole, too. I have never--I don't like heights--I got up that pole, went to the top of it, saw what they were doing, and came back down. Now, do you know anything about pole climbing?

DC: Not at all.

JB: Pole climbing, if you do tend to fall, or slip, the last thing you want to do it grab. You don't. You push yourself away from the pole, and you have gaffs on your feet, shoes, which forces your feet into the pole and keeps you from falling. My other lieutenant wouldn't go up, and my platoon was so happy, a () in the company said, "My lieutenant does that. Look at him." Well, I went up once. Have not been up that high again on a pole, but I proved that I could do it. And that's the way we operated. The company commander, as I said, was an infantry captain who I later ran across in

other services, but my tour there ended when I was, reached the going-home point. I separated in 1946, came home, went to--I stayed in the Reserves although I could have been separated, and for some reason I just felt that I liked what I was doing, I stayed in the Reserves. And in order to do that, I had to become a signal officer because I was infantry, transferred to signal corps, doing this assignment. And went into the Reserve, went as a signal officer. Stayed active in the Reserves, and went through Reserve training. I had a chance to go to college--mind you, I had no college at this time, and so I enroll in Lincoln University in Oxford, Pennsylvania. Lincoln College, excuse me. And at the week that I was supposed to report for class, which would have been in February of 1947, [25:00] I got a call from my old football coach at Lower Merion. "How would you like to go to Muhlenberg?" "Where in the hell's Muhlenberg?" "It's in Allentown, Pennsylvania." "Why Muhlenberg?" "They've got an excellent pre-med program," I wanted to become a doctor at that time. And I said, "Hmm. Okay, sure." And so I went to Muhlenberg College, the first black American to go to Muhlenberg, I was on a football scholarship, I used to collect about thirty-odd dollars a month, stipend, which took care of my incidentals. The--

DC: So rather than go to Lincoln, which is--

JB: Yes.

DC: --an HBCU, maybe the first HBCU--

JB: Which is a black school.

DC: --yeah. To--

JB: I went to Muhlenberg.

DC: --Muhlenberg.

JB: In Allentown. First black student. Did very well, as a matter of fact. However, let me back up a little bit. Muhlenberg, this is--I went there in February of 1957. Excuse me, 1947. And the coach at Muhlenberg had just gotten there, he came from a prep program, prep school, and he brought a couple of his own players, and they were really good players. He had spring practice, and we're out there, under the lights, spring practice, contact. And I injured myself, my shoulders. Parter--reason I injured myself, how it got, happened, my equipment was not properly fitted. The trainers who gave me the equipment had given me in appropriate equipment, and I suffered a shoulder separation.

DC: On--they purposely gave that to you?

JB: I won't say on pur--just that's what, I ended up by getting it, let's put it that way.

DC: Okay, okay.

JB: And I couldn't play football any more. And I decided, then, that I really don't need this because I was doing quite well academically, and I found out that I could stay in college, I was there on the GI Bill of Rights, so I didn't need to--money from that standpoint, I didn't need the thirty dollars, thirty-one dollars for sti--for incidentals, so I just dropped my football scholarship and got serious about playing academics. Of course, I forgot to mention, between the time I got home and going to Muhlenberg, I met a young nurse from suburban Philadelphia, she was in nursing training, and we decided to get married. So in 1948, January of 1948, 29th of January, 1948, we had our wedding. I'll point out that, that morning, day before that, I'd taken the final exam in analytic geometry, I'm on a pre-med scholarship, pre-med student, and I did not do well. As a

matter of fact, I went into that, took that test, I read the questions, [Gasp]. Re-read them, in my answer on the sheet, I re-wrote the question and took a guess with each question, and turned it in, and the professors called me in and said, "Becton, you know you didn't do well." "Yes, sir." "I know what you--I know exactly what you've done. You have been memorizing formulas in liquid geometry." And he's right, I'd been memorizing, not understanding it. And up until that time I'd been doing quite well. He said, "Okay, you've been making A's, but I'm going to give you a B for the course because you flunked the final exam." "Yes, sir, I understand that." The very next day I had my wedding. And a lot of friends say, "I know you flunked the test, you were getting married." So that makes a long story short.

We got married the 29th of January, and started off on our honeymoon, and on--we just had a great time. I might add that, on our honeymoon, which is a rather unique story, my brother who--younger than I, dropped out of school during World War II, joined the Navy, frustrated his parents and everyone else, but he had dro--he had run away from home a couple of times, so Mom was convinced that he would not do well staying there, and so he went to join the Navy. She approved of him to join the Navy, and he went off, going off to college. And he was going to college in Shaw University in North Carolina. To get down there, we were driving down. [30:00] And so my mother drove the car, and my brother, Joe, my wife, Louise, and I went down--unique story, your mother going on your honeymoon as--but that's the way we operated in those days--and dropped him off, came back up and everything went fine from then. But that was in January of 1948. Stayed and did quite well in school.

Harry Truman, later that year, issued Executive Order 9981 to integrate the military. I really had enjoyed being in the military, and I was in training camp at Aberdeen Proving Ground during the summer when the order was issued. And I came back home and told my wife, "Well, I have a chance to go back into active duty," and I really liked what I was doing, and I couldn't, not going to be a doctor anyhow. I wasn't doing well in chemistry, which is not very good for a doctor. And so she was happy, excited if I went. Because she was a nurse, working, so we weren't going to starve. While I was at Aberdeen Proving Ground, when the order was issued, the commander of the post called all the officers together. He read the executive order signed by the president, and after he finished--and Aberdeen, by the way, was a completely integrated post--read the executive order, he called the, two of the officers in and he said, "As long as I'm here, there'll be no change." By that he meant, Officers' Club Number One, Officers' Club Number Two. Swimming Pool Number One, Swimming Pool Number Two. NCO Club Number One, NCO Club Number Two. All the ones are white, all the twos are black. And during his period as the commander, after the order was issued, no change. So. When I went back on active duty, we were expecting our first child. I was now at, I was on orders to a signal unit at Fort Bliss, Texas, I--being, I was recalled as an infantry officer because I wanted to go to infantry, and--

DC: Can I interrupt just for one second to ask a, are we-- [Recorder is turned off and then back on] Okay, so. Pardon my interruption, but I just wanted to follow up. Having heard the president's executive order, and I imagine having some reaction to that, and hope for--

JB: Sure.

DC: --a career--

JB: We're happy, black people were happy.

DC: --possibilities opening up, and then hearing the response of the, the commander--

JB: Post commander.

DC: --the post commander. Can you walk me through the range of feelings that you went through?

JB: Well, let me back up a little bit, a little bit of history. World War I, the black soldiers were fighting in segregated units, the commander in Europe, Pershing, did not want black troops, black commands. The 369th, my unit in World War II, had fought with the French because they preferred, they wanted us, and did well. Came back well-rewarded. And when the 369th got back in the States, they were not greeted as heroes, but they came back through New York, and jeered. In 1925--I could be off by a year--there was a study done at Carlisle Barracks, the Army War College, basically saying that the black soldiers, while they may be good doing stevedore work, laboring, they were not good for thinking through a project or being able to officially control soldiers, and could not do certain other things, technical things. That study stayed around for a long time. So when World War II came along, that was the mentality of the officer corps, of leadership, of the War Department. No reason to change it. When Neil Davis became a fighter pilot, he had some major problems but--because the 93rd, the 99th Pursuit Squadron did very well. Were able to shoot down aircraft and not lost an aircr--not lost a fighter that they were escorting. Or a bomber that they were escorting. [35:00] So it doesn't surprise me or anyone else that some, there were certain beliefs in the military

leaders that--well, just a president, that we can do, this is our army and we can do what we want to do. May I point out today, in 2015, you have attitudes where folks are saying one thing and the president's saying something else? It's not much different. So the army--soldiers are, and leaders are, do what they're told to do, and once the word came out and it set to mind to do a certain thing, to get on with the program. Their job is to be loyal. And no one contested, that I know of, this post commander. I'm not even too sure that the Army War Department knew about it. I'm a lieutenant, I'm not going to get up there and challenge it, and no one else wanted to challenge it, so. I left that post, by the way, when--I'm ahead of myself, now, but that's what the attitude was. When--

DC: And the executive order didn't have a timeline, it just--

JB: No, it didn't.

DC: --yeah. Right.

JB: It basically said, as I recall, [Pause] the, I'm--I can look at that book I have over there, and tell you what it, I've got the order in there, but it basically said, "With all deliberate speed," was the term that was used.

DC: Right. Very similar to the Brown decision, all deliberate speed.

JB: Yes, that's exactly right. And so, I'm now back on active duty, went to Fort Bliss as a signal officer. I had applied for infantry, and I applied to become a regular army officer. The difference between being a regular army officer and a reserve officer is, I hope, is understood. It's a, it's the way to go if you want to be a career soldier. While at Fort Bliss, I was in a signal unit company. I was the junior officer, and our job was to go from Fort Bliss to Fort Bragg and participate in the maneuvers. To do this you've got to drive by road, and we took our signal unit, trucks and all, from Fort Bliss to

Fort Bragg as a--see, I'm the junior officer, so I'm the guy in charge of the mess hall, kitchen. My job was to be with the cooks, to go out, cook, and when the soldiers join us, feed them, and then move to the next point while they're coming along behind us. Cook, prepare a meal for them, select a bivouac area. Driving by road from El Paso to Fort Bragg is not easily done, particularly when you don't have your radio communication. We're a signal unit, but we don't do a radio, just telephone. The very first place out, Van Horn, Texas, very unique place. They didn't cotton to blacks at all, no matter with the army or not. It so happened that I had a, I'd go out, set up our bivouac area, set up the kitchen, do the kitch--doing the cooking, when the company came in, then I had to take a listing of things, what they wanted from downtown. Okay, that's easy. I took a list of things they wanted. Of course, soldiers want things they don't provide, like cigarettes, and candy, and you name it. I had a list. I went down to a local drug store and was--I gave the list to the store owner, and he was happy, see, this great big list of things he was going to sell. And I went to the w--

DC: And you're in uniform.

JB: I was in uniform, naturally. Field uniform. I went to the fountain, soda fountain where they make ice cream sodas, stuff like that. I was enjoying myself. And my sergeant with me was collecting things that we were going to buy. All of a sudden the guy behind the counter stiffened up. I didn't pay any attention to that. And next thing, the guy was tapping me on the shoulder. "Get away from the counter." "Why?" "I said so." I turned around, great big badge here and a great big fellow in uniform with a weapon. [40:00] And, "Okay." I understood what he was saying, and I understood why he said it. And I said to the sergeant, "Have we paid for anything yet?" "No, sir."

“Okay, we’re leaving.” And we walked out. And the sheriff had gotten back to the bivouac area--by the way, I forgot to mention my company commander was a major, white. We got back to the bivouac area and the sheriff had gotten there before I got there. And he had telling, was telling this, the sheriff was telling this major that “This boy you got over here doesn’t understand what goes on down here.” And the major said, “That boy is a lieutenant, he’s not from here. He’s doing what I told him to do.” And he said, “You’d better tell him something differently while he’s here.” “Okay.” Sheriff left, I get back, I’m told what took place.

The very next morning we’re heading out, continuing our route, and a sedan--Studebaker, as a matter of fact--had an accident. It passed us flying like a bat out of hell. And I--by the way, a jeep and a three-quarter ton, whole pickup truck type thing--he passed us like a bat out of hell, had and she’s, had an accident. Clobbered. And we get up there to where it was, saw what happened, took the--no emergency around, we took the two women out of the truck, out of their cars, put them in our pickup truck and I continued in my jeep, on my way. My truck took these women back to the hospital in Van Horn, Texas. The doctors said that the action of these soldiers saved these women. And when the sheriff came into the hospital to hear about the accident, started checking on it. Wanted to find, “Okay, how did it happen, who brought them back?” And my sergeant who had whipped me the night before, “That lieutenant who you chased out of town is the one that saved these women’s lives.” There was a message there, too. We went on our way from there, on time, in fact, on to Fort Bragg.

But that was a unique experience for me, to go through that. It changed the minds of some people, too, to include that sheriff. That, “Hey, maybe they’re not all bad for

these soldiers.” That went on until we went to, we got to Fort Bragg, went through the drill of putting up communications. It was shortly thereafter, my orders came through, my assignment came through to go to an infantry unit. And I was then transferred from the 29th Signal to the 2nd Division at Fort Lewis, Washington, on competitive tour, competing for regular army appointment. And we did quite well at Fort Lewis, still a segregated unit, the division, 9th Infantry Regiment, had three battalions. One battalion was black, the other two battalions were white. I was assigned to L Company, third battalion, 9th Infantry. We trained and were prepared to keep doing what we were doing, and the Korean War broke out.

DC: Now, did the fort, again have-- [Recorder is turned off and then back on]

JB: Okay.

DC: So, I was just asking about the facilities, right, at Fort Lewis.

JB: Ready to go again?

M1: Yes, we're going.

JB: At Fort Lewis, 2nd Division, Infantry Division, had a complete complement of three regiments, and the only regiment that had blacks were 9th Infantry, the other two division--the other two regiments did not, and division artillery had a black battalion. The black battalion in the 9th Infantry, the third battalion, I would say it was all black except for the--battalion commander was black, too. Another story about that. And the battalion, artillery battalion, one of the sergeants [45:00] turned out to be a pretty important person, he became a member of the Congress, Charlie Rangel, that name may ring a bell?

DC: Yes, yes, it does.

JB: He was from the F Battalion, and we talked about this many times since that time. But. When--as I said, we trained very hard at Fort Lewis before the war broke out. I was, among my regular duties of infantry platoon leader, I was also in charge of the battalion that later became the regimental drill team. And we had a tremendously fine unit, went out and put on performances, not only for the soldiers, but also for the civilians. Did quite well, and I got quite a reputation for doing that.

DC: And your equipment was up to date?

JB: Equipment was up to date, everything is reg--like the rest of the unit, the rest of the army, but we're still black ourselves. I asked for the battalion commander, he said, "Go ahead, do it." I said, "Let's--we've got some soldiers, white soldiers from the rest of the regiment that wanted to join our team." Hell, I was fine, happy with that. But I had to go to the regimental exec. And I'll never forget what he said. Said, "Are you the lieutenant op? I like the way your team, what they do. They look good, and they're good for the army, and certainly good for the soldiers. But if you put white soldiers in there, it'll break up the appearance in the colors." Lieutenant colonel is saying that, I'm a lieutenant, not much I can say about it. "Okay, fine." Again, we're talking 1950. We trained, and right about the time when the, April of 1950, our battalion commander got orders to go to be reassigned. And it was--the war broke out, as you may recall, in June of 1950. And bef--he had just--still in the post, but not moved. And when the word came up that we've got to be, we were going to be sent overseas, alerted for war, for combat, we had a white battalion commander in now. And we thought that the army would do the right thing, bring our battalion commander back, who we had before, who had trained us, did a very fine job doing that, and put it back, put us with our old commander. He was

the only lieutenant colonel that I knew of that had a PhD. He happened to be a zoology, biologist. And doing a--he was also a very hard-nosed person, for demanding excellence. And he'll fire you in a heartbeat and cause you major problems. But we were pleased with that because we knew that he was on our side. The person they brought back in to command was the commander that we had before he got there, he was still doing something else. And our, a lot of us thought that, "Hey, bring back our commander because he had done so well." It didn't work that way. Now, June of--we're deployed, of 1950, the 9th Infantry were the first unit to leave the States to go to Korea.

DC: Did you know where you were going?

JB: We knew it was a Korea, there was a war going on.

DC: Did you know any, but did you know anything about Korea?

JB: No, no. I didn't know where Korea was. Hey, I'm a, I'm now nineteen, I guess I was twenty by that time. But I quickly found out where it was and what they were doing. I knew what we had to when we got there. Be prepared to fight. And we were on warships, heading off to the combat zone, landed at Pusan, Korea. My unit was the L Company, we were the first to land. Went into a bivouac area while the rest of the battalion and regiment came on. Interesting enough, while we're sitting there we got word that we were going to be removed from the regiment on a separate mission. This is in 1950, and no one asked the question why because it came from higher headquarters, MacArthur's headquarters, saying, "We want a battalion to go up to P'ohang to protect an airfield." [50:00] "Okay." So, as we were getting our gear ready, I got called to regimental headquarters. "Lieutenant Becton, we want you to take a patrol with communication gear to set up a command, a command post, CP, communication, rather,

so that when we close down, when your battalion goes into it, that we're ready to go."

And so I got my sufficient number of men, small platoon, and took communication gear, a couple of three pickup, three two-and-a-half-ton trucks with communication gear on the back of them. And we drove from our airfield to the site where we were sent to protect the airfield. And we got there, I asked a question, by the way: "Any activity in the area?" "Nope, no one, no bad guys there." And we got up to P'ohang-dong, set up a communi-- our gear, and as the nec--that morning, we're waiting for the battalion to join us and we got a report in that the battalion got ambushed. And lost some people, and they finally joined the area which we were in, the same area that we had driven through, and that the guys had, bad guys knew who we were. They could have done serious damage but let us go through, thinking is they could take care of bigger things later. When they then came up, they got ambushed. And we survived that. My first close call.

We stayed there, had a couple patrols protecting the airfield. And then the orders came in for the battalion to move back and join the regiment. It is now September. We are breaking out of, the emphasis was now to break out of the Pusan Perimeter, which has some notoriety, that the forces were driven back into that. And we re-joined the regiment and prepared to go to serious combat. We've had some combat up until that time. L Company was to be lead battalion, lead company in the battalion if we attacked the area, after we joined the regiment. My platoon got selected to be the lead platoon in the company. And as we were moving out, with all of our armor and everything else, ran into a () attacking a hill called 201. This hill was well protected, we got halfway up the hill and we got, ran into tremendous enemy fire and had to protect ourselves and seek cover. And while we're there, the adjacent battalion, second battalion, engaged

because no one had told them that US forces were going to be out there. One of those crazy things. So the bad guys are firing at us, our second battalion is firing at us, and we had nothing to do but hunker down until we could, night came. And we returned the fire on the bad guys, and prayed that we were able to do some damage on the bad guys, but we got hurt. When darkness came, we withdrew back into the battalion area. I had lost some people, but we brought them with us. But that breakthrough was sufficient enough for our battalion to move out. The--I might add that while we're in this [also?] battle, we had support by our air force, and they mistook us for enemy. So they also attacked us, too. Fighter aircraft. And no matter what we did, they kept going to some--my messenger, my, as, I'm a lieutenant now, [55:00] he grabbed panel, marking panels, got out in front and waved them up and down at the air force, they're coming back at us. They understood that, "Wrong hill, get the next hill." The guy got back that, we gave him an award, by the way, for that. And he probably saved our lives.

The interesting part about that, I had told my men that, once we get in combat, we're going to stick together as a team. Don't start running to the rear. If you do, I'll kill you. And, you know, tongue in cheek, they thought. And when the plane came back, some of my soldiers start to get up and shoot--I mean, run, move back to the rear. And I took a carbine, a small rifle, and unloaded the magazine in front of them. And they looked at me, and looked at the planes. And they knew that I was closer to them than the planes. They got back on the ground. In the meantime, the soldiers, the fighter pilots also recognized that we're good guys, and so they went elsewhere. My soldiers got back on the ground, and we--when we got back into camp, recovered, we had a little discussion. "Lieutenant, would you have shot us?" "You're here, aren't you?" "Well,

yeah.” “You didn’t keep running, did you?” “No.” “Well, you make up your own mind.”

It was also, during that period, that I had gotten wounded. And that was my first trip to the hospital. I went back to Japan, as a matter of fact, ended up in Sendai, Japan for my recovery. And I’m pointing that out because I came back on ac--came back to join the unit as soon as I could because General MacArthur said we were going to be home for Christmas, and I wanted to be back h--victory, wanted to be home for Christmas. It didn’t work out that way. I re-joined the regiment from the hospital. And by that time, the regiment had done, the division had done quite well. We had moved north, into North Korea. And I was in the battalion, third battalion, 9th Infantry, and one of the lead regiments in the attack going up north. And, once again, my company was selected to lead the battalion, and it was cold, then. Remember, we left the States in the summertime, we didn’t have winter gear, and we’re now up, north of the 38th parallel into North Korea, not too many miles from the northern border. Again, we had our battles to do.

DC: And it’s mountainous, and it’s cold.

JB: That’s right. And no winter gear. But we were able to take care of ourselves. We were now in November, it’s cold, digging in to fight, to continue to fight going north. It was Thanksgiving time. And I remember that because they had turkey dinner. However, by the time the meal got to where we were, the turkey was a little bit cold, like, frozen. And we found we can take care of that, our kitchen did the best they could, and we had dug in, had our fires out, and trying to stay warm, and the Chinese entered the war. The date, you can check that, find what--because it was pretty specific

when they came in. We contained the battle against the Chinese and the North Koreans. I was, again, my platoon was picked to lead the company in the attack, and we were told to reconnoiter a ground, high ground in front of us.

DC: Did you ever wonder why you kept getting chosen to lead?

JB: Say again, please?

DC: Did you ever wonder why your unit kept being, getting chosen to go out in front?

JB: We were pretty good.

DC: Yeah?

JB: Hey, remember, I said I was on compet--the tour, I was competing for regimental appointments, so the battalion commander, even the new battalion commander, said, "Okay, Becton's can make it happen." [1:00:00] Where the other guy could do the same thing, but no. And my company commander, who was a pretty good friend of my dad, he had other lieutenants he could pick on, but they had, two of them had been in combat in World War II, and I'm now a twenty-year-old, and eager, and everything else. I had a good unit, we had trained well, my soldiers trusted me and I trusted them. And I, hell, I was prepared to do it.

DC: You were ready? Yeah, yeah.

JB: The next time, we were making an attack up a hill, and as I was--before I left, my battalion commander had been approached by the adjacent battalion commander from the 25th Regiment, which happened to be a black unit, too. The 25th Division. And the battalion commander and my battalion commander were collaborating, talking about many things, I guess. I'm heading up the hill, running the contact. And I was told to not

engage because you, you're out there by yourself with your patrol, return to the battalion. I came off the hill, and report to the battalion commander, and the other battalion commander, "Huh, there's nothing up there, I know better than that." And my colonel looked at me and looked back at him. And I got orders, "Okay, get back up there." And I start back up the hill again, with my unit. This time picked up a wound. One of those million-dollar, yeah. A thousand-dollar wound. The bullet, it went, bullet went through, between my tendon in my left ankle, and the bone, it did not touch the tendon, nor did it touch the bone. Now, how much space is down there? Not much. Bullet went through there, nothing, no damage done to either. I came back down, that battalion commander is still there, "Are you satisfied, now, Colonel?" And he, "Grr," so I got evacuated from the battalion.

That's when history will tell you that the army had its first defeat. When the Chinese and the North Koreans attacked US forces and chased them out of North Korea. I got evacuated by air. The battalion and regiment suffered severe damage. The final toll were, I think, as I recall, out of our battalion, five officers survived. The others were captured or killed. I fall in the category of one of the five who survived because I had been evacuated, and am now back in Japan. The US forces were pulled, pushed back south of the 38th parallel and regrouped. I am now back in Japan, back to the same hospital I'd been in before, which I rushed out of. Went to the same ward, as a matter of fact, and they're s-- "You? Back here, again?" "Yes, I'm back here again. And this time I'm not going to rush home." They understood, I got very good treatment and care, and during that period, the army regrouped, recovered, prepared to take care of business. I was told to "Rebuild your strength by going out and learning how to ski." Sendai is

known for its slopes and stuff like that, and so, fine, I'd go out and try it. I never skied before, you understand. Went out to the training area where they teach skiing, and they gave me skis, flat board, two straps. One across the instep, one across the heel. No boots, nothing else. And I did like you might expect. You ski, by the way?

DC: Yes.

JB: So you understand what kind of trouble I had. I did not do very well at all. But I managed to get back off the hill, and went back to the hospital area. But that taught me a lesson about trying to how, trying to ski with that kind of equipment. I eventually come back to the unit, now it is March. Back to the regiment, and the, back in the base camp, before I moved up the regiment, they had a new executive officer in the regiment. Lieutenant Colonel [Orlento Barsani?]. And you'll see why I remember that name in a few minutes. And when I get back to the regimental rear, and I meet the battalion, [1:05:00] the exec, and he introduced me to this regimental exec, and the battalion exec said, "We're going to put Becton in to back the battalion because he'll put them into the [history?] operation, he's been in combat, he understands, he can help us there. Barzani took one look at me. "Lieutenant, how do you feel?" "I feel pretty good, sir." "Oh, we're going to put him in the Company." Why? Because the company he picked for me was L Company, sound familiar? The company I was in before. They had lost all their officers and a few of their NCOs, they needed some leadership up there. Battalion adjutant said, "But, sir, he just got--" "He's going to go to the company." "Yes, sir." So I ended up, now, going back to L Comp--K Company--L Company, excuse me, and he's correct, we had all the officers had been gone, I guess lost, some of the NCO, I had a couple key NCOs that knew me and I knew them. So I'm now the company commander,

and we organized what we had, got in some new lieutenants, second lieutenants, and all the forces in the ().

DC: Still all-black, or white replacements at this point?

JB: By that time, we are integrated. I failed to mention one point. Let me go back a little bit. Back in August, before I got 201, when I got my first wound, the regimental commander, a Colonel C.C. Sloane, had been told by the adjutant, "We've got incoming replacements," qualified by MOS, Military Occupational --Military Specialties, but not by race." And Sloane said, "Put them where they're needed. Put them where they're needed." That took care of the integration within the 9th Infantry. We went to the battalions, spread them out, and when I got my first integrated soldier, he was an American, Mexican American from Texas, and when he came in I told my platoon sergeant, "Don't let anything happen to that guy, he's our first one non-black, we're not going to hurt him at all." And he said, "Yes, sir. We'll take care of that." And with that, we became integrated. And so, now, the division's integrated, and by the time we're in the fighting, we're, we had black company commanders and white battalions and so forth. So we were doing quite well. When I got back to the--

DC: So it was military necessity that really changed--

JB: Say again?

DC: It was military necessity, it was the need for bodies?

JB: Yeah there was no question about it. It was, it was, had nothing to do with the executive order. The fact that we were, we were combat, where people are qualified and the commanders recognized their soldiers, put them where they're needed. Military necessity. And that's the way we operated. By the time I got back to the regiment, it

would have been about, I guess, April. I've got to check my book for, to find out, but that's about what time it was. And we were in a base area, the division was still engaged, I am now a company commander, lieutenant, first lieutenant, and we got a white officer captain assigned to us to be the company commander. And he had not been in combat before, the company was completely integrated by this time, and we had long discussions, the captain and myself, and he said, "Okay. I want you to keep doing what you've been doing, to be in charge, I'll take care of the base area and support you." And that's how I finished the war in Korea. With that arrangement. I should point out that, by that time, I had received two Purple Hearts, I received a Silver Star for the operations back in the breaking out of the Pusan Perimeter, attacking Hill 201, where I got my first wound, and it's now into May, things are going, we're moving gradually ahead, but by that time they started rotating people home. And I was able to rotate home, leaving the regiment, [1:10:00] came back to the States, went off to, I was assigned to Camp Edwards, in Massachusetts.

The army's completely integrated now, up to a point. Up at Camp Edwards, there was one black company. And their job was post police and kitchen work, kitchen, cooking for the soldiers, small base. And our job was to police the post, police, picking up trash and cooking for these white soldiers and other white units. Oh, that unit was all black, I might add. And I did not cotton to that very much, because I had been in combat, I had done a pretty good job, I thought, now I'm back in this kind of situation. And so I start complaining. I called my branch by telephone, saying, "Look. I know what you got, got me out here, I'm still on competitive tour, I understand that too, and--but don't you think I deserve something better than this?" Within an hour I got a call back.

“You’re being transferred to Indiantown Gap, Indiantown Gap Military Reservation,” which is a basic training for soldiers. And I went from Camp Edwards to Indiantown Gap, as a company commander, basic training. It was there that I got, I’d been promoted to captain, it was there that I got integrated into the regular army. Orders come in, and I’m in tall cotton, happy about that, training my unit, we’re doing a great job turning out basic trainees. And it was then that--can I take a break, now?

DC: Yeah. Sure. [Recorder is turned off and then back on]

JB: All right. I was also, after initially training soldiers, I was also selected to go to signal officer communication course infantry, learn how to become a combo communication officer in an infantry unit. Why was I selected for that? Because I had been a signal officer, and they said, “Okay, he can do that.” Big difference between pole-climbing and stringing wire and being a guy in charge of communication on the ground. But I went off to school. I come back to Indiantown Gap, after the period of school training which was about maybe nine weeks, and it was then--my family stayed, by the way, when I was at Indiantown Gap, they stayed in Philadelphia, and I was going back and forth. Got orders to Germany. So this, “Okay. We can do that.” Packed up the bags. We now have two daughters. I’m not sure--did I mention the fact that when my first daughter was born, that I was going back on active duty? If I didn’t mention that, I was heading to Fort Bliss, and my wife was expecting, momentarily. They put my orders in delay, permitted me to stay in the Philadelphia area while she delivered. By that time I, they sent me to Fort Monmouth, which is not too far away. I was sent to a signal unit there, while we waited.

Our first daughter was born, Shirley, and then I went to Fort Bliss, and the family never came down there because it was just ri--it wasn't right for the family to move and stuff like that. The second daughter was born when we were heading off to Korea. She was born on, in July, in Sep-- we took off from Fort Lewis in July, she was born in September. And still told my rich relations, when I left the post at Fort Lewis, we had to stay, my family had to stay at a guest house. And I had made arrangements for them to stay there and by the time that we had, I was heading overseas, and my wife had a problem with the manager at the guest house, [1:15:00] one of those things which you sort of deal with. While army, military portion, was segreg-- integrated, some of the post facilities weren't, still had the mentality of our civilians. And my mother had flown in from Philadelphia to drive my family back to Philadelphia. My mother is a very interesting, was a very interesting person, she'd go any place, fly, drive, whatever. And so she drove the car, with my wife, our first child, my company commander and his wife, who was also pregnant. Which may speak to why my company commanders kept picking me to--he could trust me--and our dog. And they drove back from Fort Lewis to Philadelphia, had no problems en route, they got tremendous treatment, went to Columbus, Ohio, where my company commander's wife was going, and their child, and they continued on to Phila--excuse me--Philadelphia. Our mother got her first trip speeding ticket on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, and they explained it to, who they were, et cetera, the trooper was very polite, said, "Okay, go on, but take it easy." But my mother wanted, she liked to drive. Heavy foot, and I got to the point that I had to, since I was the one in charge, now, and she was living in our house, "Mom, the next speeding ticket you get, that's going to be it because I control the insurance and we can't go through that,

you'll kill yourself." "Grr." But she, "Okay." Now, I'm heading off to--I had to put that in because she was part of the program. I go off to Germany--

DC: I was probably more scared during that conversation than during some of your combat material. [Laughter]

JB: Oh, yes. We'd gone off to Germany and joined the second army division in West Germany. Mainz, Gonsenheim is our location, where my co--my unit was located, and I was in Combat Command B, CCB. I'm now a captain, communication-trained, and I became the communication officer for the battalion. 42nd Army Infantry Battalion, and I did a pretty good job. Learned how to do things with the communications, I became a MARS, Military Amateur Radio, and I set up the MARS station for the regiment, and we named the station after CCB, the regiment, and the commander, I'm convinced, "I'll be happier because--." His regiment had a MARS station, no one else had one. And so I became a tall cotton, I got things not many other people could have gotten. And container training, at this time in Mainz, Germany, I now had been over there long enough to come home. And during this training, I, after having my communications training, I became the company commander, which made it my third company, company in combat, even though it was terminated, a short time, but still did the work. Company at Indiantown Gap, training company, and now I've got another infantry company, armored infantry, and we trained pretty hard. Had personnel carriers and some movement, armored plates and so forth. I returned to the States. It is now 1957. I had gone to, by the way, at Fort, back to Fort Benning for advanced course training before going to Germany, and I failed to mention that we had our third child there, at Fort Benning. [1:20:00]

DC: Now, are you seeing racial change in the army post-war?

JB: The army? Yes. It's going through many changes, and by this time, at Benning, my n-- at that time, I was completely integrated, in an integrated unit, and by the time I got to Germany, totally integrated. Integrated but, yet, absolutely at a certain qualified, certain people. So our, the signal officer, the senior block officer in the division was a black lieutenant colonel assigned to our technical service trainings, as we call them, and when it got time for a battalion commander to change, we were encouraging him to become the new battalion commander. I knew enough people at the division because I had, as a signal officer, I used to--as a communicator, I used to deal with folks at the division, and when I was in operations, I dealt with the people there. And I tried to encourage this lieutenant colonel to come down and join us because we had a fine battalion, and he was qualified, and the interesting part about that, his name was Johnson but his wife was, you may have heard of a baseball player, Campanella. His wife was from that family, and with that name, he could have gotten anything he wanted to, but he decided, no, he would just stay where he is because the company we had () but the exec officer of a unit--not a combat unit--and so that, he stayed up there and so we did our thing.

It's now time for me to come back to the States. I was assigned ROTC duty. And mind you, I did not have a degree. And I was assigned to a place called Prairie View. I went there as a captain, assigned to the military science department, the only captain in the unit, a lieutenant colonel, three majors, and me, captain, the junior officer. Couple of challenges. When I went to that job, I was sent there by a very good friend who is now at the Department of the Army, he said, "You go down to Prairie View and get your, go to

school, take classes, get your degree.” “Roger that.” So I get, we get to Prairie View, and--oh, by the way, while--well, from a racial standpoint while driving down there, we were told by some friends from Germany, “Now, when you go down there, you stop by white friends. When you go through Mississippi, stop by this place, my parents are there, see them, and they’ll take care of you, drive you through. Now, make sure you don’t talk to two people. One is the mother--just talk to my father, just don’t talk to my mother--and he’ll understand, don’t talk to her, she won’t understand,” because I’m still black and they still haven’t gotten to that point. We dro-- and my, I might add also, going there, that while we’re in Germany--I keep forgetting these things, now--while in Germany, my mother and mother-in-law joined us. They came over to visit with us, to see Europe, a trip over there, and we convinced my wife’s mother to stay with us. My father finally got tired, he said, “When are you coming home, Rose Becton?” And she got the message, so she got on a boat and came back. And she had a good time, Mom had a good time, staying with us. And that made the family comfortable because my mother-in-law went with us, she took care of things, and she stayed with us until she died. And I might also add that, while she was with us, whenever there was a disagreement in my family, my wife and myself, Mom was on my side, which irritated Louise to no end. That’s no story.

By that time, we get to Texas, Prairie View, with three daughters. The third one was born while at Fort Benning, and she’s from, her background, birth certificate reads, Georgia, and [1:25:00] it was also in Columbus, Georgia that my wife learned how to drive and get her driver’s license. And the policeman who checked her out for driving, he got into the car and Louise got on the driver’s side, and he said, “Okay,” told her to do certain things, and she drove probably less than a block, turned around because the police

officer told her, parked the car, and got out, "You pass." And I later found out that the officer was so impressed by the way that she controlled herself, the way she got into the car, the way she adjusted everything and how she made the U-turn and parked the car, that's enough for him. That was her driver's license. Okay. We're now at Fort--down at Prairie View. We got a house, rented from an old math professor who had a little second house. My professor of military science, my boss, was a lieutenant colonel. I said we got three majors and myself, and I had, my struc-- my group was the, teaching the juniors-- Military Science Three was the specification. There are no white students, a few white faculty, and I was the only combat-experienced officer in this group, of the late war, we had some World War II. And when I announced to the professor of military science that I'm going to take courses, and he blew up. "There's no way in the world you can take a course and work for me." "Sir, I was sent down here--" "You're assigned here, right?" "Yes, sir." "You can't take courses. The work is too demanding." And I should also point out, in addition to being an instructor, I was also his adjutant, which meant that my desk was right outside the office where his was located. The next day, after we had this little blow-up, I report in about 7:30, the colonel comes in about thirty minutes later, closes his door, which is not, which is usual, and a few minutes later I get a call, "Becton, get in here." "Yes, sir." I go in his office, reported, "All right, you can take the courses. But let me tell you one thing. If there's any indication whatsoever it's interfering with your being an instructor, you're in trouble." "Yes, sir, I understand that." "No questions about it." "No, sir." I came back outside, and my couple of sergeants, they knew what was going on, they smiled. And two of the three majors were roaming back and forth, they got word that I could take courses now, and the third major was the exec, and he had

his own office. And I'm pointing all these things out to present the climate because I am now a regular army captain, the only regular army officer in the group, the only non-college graduate, the only one who had been in combat recently, and now I got my way by going and taking courses. So I'm sort of a target for a lot of people to shoot at. But I was pretty good at what I did. I was a good instructor, and I did well academically, and I should point out that I developed a relationship with the students that, even to this day, we're still very close to each other.

I am now approaching graduation, been there for two years. The last year I'm there, the army pays for my going to school, they had a final semester plan. When you get within your final semester of graduation, the army foots the bill for books and everything. So that took care, no worries from that standpoint, I was able to do my job, being an instructor, able to get what the, do my classes quite well, I was able to influence the professor of military science--a new one came in by that time [1:30:00]--and he understood what I was doing, he was a very fine, he was then a colonel, that came in to become the professor of military science, and he was able to influence the person coming in to be the commencement speaker, who I had met back when I was in Washington. And we're now 1960, time for commencement, received my degree, the commencement speaker made some reference to Captain Becton, such a good man, great reputation, just did not hurt anyone's reputation, the school's, my fellow students smiled, and the professors smiled and stuff like that. And when I crossed the states to get my diploma degree, the person reading off the graduate, list of graduates, stopped the movement, "Wait a minute. Captain Becton is the five thousandth graduate of Prairie View A&M University." Now, the chance of my being the five thousandth graduate is like a still ball

[on a hill?]. I don't believe it, but the five thousandth graduate took place during that period, and it's convenient for the army and for the university to use that opportunity. I walked off the five thousandth graduate, smiling, and got my degree, we're in tall cotton. Okay. I now have a diploma, went back into the army, and went off to the command general staff college, a school for spec-- particularly selected young captains and majors and lieutenant colonels, but particularly young captains. I'm now a regular army officer in the school, at Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, and peers' support, could not ask for more because I met people in Germany, at Indiantown Gap and elsewhere, my student company commander at the Fort Benning, who was a lieutenant colonel, he maintained a relationship with me, he later became a division commander, which is rather important, I'm now at Fort Leavenworth, tough academic work, working very hard to get through. While there, I had become a major. The army is still not that overrun by black officers, but in my class at Leavenworth, we had sixteen black officers out of six hundred. And we sort of kept together as a group except for one, he was lieutenant colonel and he felt that it was above him, didn't need to associate with us majors, junior to him. So, to make a long story short, we got through, he failed academically, the rest of us made it because we studied for exams, and he refused to join us for studying. And we got through.

DC: You worked together, right?

JB: Worked together. From Leavenworth, it is now in the 1962, I graduated in 1961. Kennedy had become the president, after the little fracas down in Mexico, Cuban-- whatever you want to call it, and they start their little messing around in Germany, and before we left Leavenworth, we had orders to France. Of that group that went to France,

six of us went to the Communications Zone in France, Al decleaf? [I'll declare?], which is, for a combat armed officer, is not all that good, we thought. And we start, [1:35:00] "Why us? Why aren't we going to Germany to become, you know, where the real army is, not technicians and logisticians and stuff like that?" I finally got the message, someone else got it, that the commander in the Communications Zone, France, had complained about not getting his fair share of talent. And of the six of us going into France, two of us were black, one was this lieutenant colonel who failed at Leavenworth, and I end up in the same unit that he was, which is a very interesting story, another story. He finally decided to talk, and I got a pretty good job, he went to logistics G4, and I was in operations G3, became eventually a chief of plans and operations in France. My job was to prepare for an evacuation of US forces' families from Germany after passing through () if the Russians had crossed the border, or East Germans had crossed the border, we'd get them out, back to the States. And I got pretty good at doing that, too, I might add. In the meantime, this lieutenant colonel who had failed Leavenworth, he sort of got in more troubles in his job, and I just ignored him. His wife was livid because we were doing so well, in fact, doing so well with--. And we had our for--and we had, I should point out, at Leaven-- at Prairie View, our fourth daughter was born. And I might add--I keep forgetting to say, my wife, during that period, she worked to get her degree and became a staff nurse in the college of nursing, and was doing such a great job so that, when the dean left, my wife was asked to be the acting dean for the period while the dean was back getting her doctoral studies complete. So you got this young RN, BS, who had done so well that the president of the college says, "Okay, you be the acting dean." That did not make the other nurses very comfortable, who had been there for some time, but

they respected her. And I'm making a point of this because that's when my fourth daughter was born, my wife took time to do that, and she had developed a relationship with a doctor so that he suggested she go to Hempstead, which is a nearby town, rather than having the birth at the university. So she delivered there, the very first male to see her was the professor of military science, the new colonel who came in. And he be--as I said, he was a great guy, he was there when my wife was born--I was on the campus, working it off in class. He later became her godfather. I might add that this daughter went on to become a colonel, air force, and she's now colonel of air force, retired, so time, that goes on. Okay.

DC: Let me ask you one question, or a couple of questions.

JB: Sure.

DC: During this period, were you keeping track of, of--I mean, you're in the, you're in a military world in some ways, but there's the wider world as well, and there's a lot of change going on--

JB: There are.

DC: --so, especially in terms of race issues, and with the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955--

JB: All of those things came up and we were, I'd say, keenly aware of it. And many of I and my peers, black, we decided, "We're demonstrating how good we can be, doing our job in the army. We don't have to get out there and parade with a placard, or join any sit-ins and stuff like that, because we think we're doing a better job helping race relations by proving that we can make it." And that's, was our relationship with the public, and with peers who are no longer in the military, and they understood. And I--

when I later became a president of a college--a univ-- president of Prairie View A&M University, and that question came up. "Well, what were you doing during the war?" "I was fighting to protect you, that's what I was doing." And they understood that, too. And it helped. We saw, we had friends who, not military, who were involved, fraternities got involved, my wife was in a sorority--an academic sorority, I might add--her group did things for the sit-ins and for other people, [1:40:00] but did they get involved in those kinds of things? No. Where it came home to haunt us, I might add, was when my daughter, Karen, who was the second daughter born and she went off to South Dakota. Don't ask me how she got to South Dakota, I still don't know, but she had heard that good schools, and a couple of her friends suggested she go there, so she went there. And this took place when I was in Korea, and I, when [Pause] I heard that she was, gotten very good student, and her participation was writing letters for the local newspapers, campus newspapers, anti-war articles. And when I heard that, I, of course, you know, I blew up, reminded her where she's from, what she did. I never want to see an article written by you about anti-military. And she stopped writing. Naturally, she stopped writing because we were paying the bill for her going to school. That was one thing. We had, there were marches. We did not participate, we understood what they're doing and we maintained, by doing our job in the military to the best of our ability, helped the overall opportunity, what they're trying to do. I still believe that today.

DC: Was there some pr-- was there some pride in the fact that the military had pioneered in integration?

JB: Yes.

DC: Even though it was bumpy, of course--

JB: Yes.

DC: --but, but it did--

JB: It was realized, by a lot of people, certainly us in the military, but to the public, too, that the integration of the military, and what black majors, black students, academicians were doing on the college campus and in the military itself, were making things happen, good things happen, because it went from the Tuskegee Airmen proving that they could do that, what they're doing, we had senior officers who were able to get things done, and it wasn't too long thereafter because I became a major general. I mean a brigadier general. Colonel first, then a brigadier general, and I had command in, my first command was at Fort Hood, as a brigade commander, colonel, in the same unit that I was a communications officer for back in Germany. Excuse me. The same relationships I had made in Germany, I was still continuing. And, again, how the military was back at Leavenworth, and when I left Leavenworth in France because--in the military, we fooled around. We () each other and things, we get to know each other. It's a great relationship. And as I said, in France I was able to help to develop a relationship. I did my job very well, the lieutenant colonel, then colonel, of the unit I was in in France, became a colonel and later a brigadier general, and we still maintained relationships even though I was, by that time, a major lieutenant colonel, he's just a good guy. He was able to help me to get some of the things done later. He spoke up for me on certain occasions. And it helped. And my peers, black peers, were able to get the same thing. We worked hard. We knew what we had to do, we had our jobs to prepare for, and we advanced in the ranks and were respected for what we did, we got to certain schools because of what we had done. Not because we were black, but because we were good at what we did.

And, to this day, I have a relationship with people that call, I just had, I'm going to return, this is from a colonel who has retired from the army, is now a civilian in the Department of the Army--they call them SESers, [1:45:00] these days--a senior person working in personnel, he's going to tell me something, what's taking place in the army today. He understands what I've been doing, what I have done, and going to head a little bit high, I've been asked to do certain things by the Congress. Several years ago, the Congress set up a commission for diversity in the military. Military leadership diversity. The chairman of that commission was a general, four star, Les Lyles. I was the vice chairman, lieutenant general, and we prepared this study for the army, for the military, to deal with diversity. Now, is that race relations? Not really. It's diversity. Because there's a big difference, and some of our people, military and civilians, were unable to understand that difference. Affirmative action has certain gate posts. It's so many perf-- it had a formula. How many folk can you have, or what should they be doing? Diversity is not so much how many blacks you have, but is, what are you doing for the total population, to demonstrate that we're all qualified? And diversity is a function of learning from each other, and a lot of folk never got that message, even to this day. And so I've had a chance to work at those levels.

DC: What do you think of these--I mean, we've seen some tremendous changes, recently, with the combat positions for women being totally opened, and--

JB: I'm smiling because it was our commission, military leadership diversity commission, that made, that came down very hard. Get rid of the restrictions for women. If they're qualified, put them in the job. And we sold it. It went so far as to what just happened, with the Secretary of Defense, but up--we had, when women went to ranger

school, I could not have been happier. Some folks, even in this building, were livid about it because we've got some very senior officers here who think they know what's going on, and they blew up, and I blew up, too. In this very room, we had a meeting, one day, Rotary had a meeting, and I'm not a Rotarian, but I announced the fact that, of the bringing in military, the milit--not only in the military, in the army, but putting them in where they're qualified. And women had just been integrated into the ranger school, and I could not have been happier. And I was sitting in the next room for dinner with the Rotarians, I got a telephone call from my son, who I forgot to mention when he was born, but he was a captain in the Old Guard, in Washington, as a company commander, Honor Guard company commander, and he resigned his commission because he was never convinced that what he got, it was on his own. His name is Julius Wesley Becton, III. And every time he went anyplace, "Becton, I know your father! How is he doing?" And he--you can take that only so much. And he finally got fed up with it.

DC: He wanted to make his own?

JB: He wanted to make his own. Let me break for one story, he, as a company commander, captain at the Pentagon, was--

M1: Want me to turn this off?

JB: No. At the Pentagon parade--preparing the ground for a parade for the Honor Guard, Old Guard, that was for the military, he was out there preparing the grounds, putting in flags, markers, and two senior officers come out. One, a fellow named Gordon Sullivan, Chief of Staff of the Army, and a fellow named Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. And they see Wes, he comes up to him. "Wes, how are you doing?" "Fine, sir." "How's your father?" "Fine, sir." "What's your

mother doing?" "Sir, she's--" they kept on with this crap. [Laughter] He finally said, "Sir, I've got to go to work." "Okay." Take up all of his time. His colonel is literally looking, glaring at him, but he's stuck with these four-stars. That's the kind of relationship that we've had over the years, and we've still got that relationship to this day. But okay. Where am I now? [Pause]

DC: Oh I had been at, we had been talking about the change in the diversity commission, and the--

JB: Yeah. But before I got into that--

DC: --ranger school, and the women in the rangers.

JB: Yeah, well, that--. But that had worked very well. I think the proof of it, those two women got through ranger school. And the interesting [1:50:00] part about that, one of our senior--one of our, not senior. There are one, two, three, four lieutenant generals in this place. One is senior to me--older than I am, by a couple years--he was sitting at this dinner table when I, sitting there, and my son calls me, he said--he's a ranger, too, I might add, my son--"Hey, they just got through." And I walked back in, just smiling, and said, "I just got the best news you could think of. My son called me and said, 'Those two rangers, female, just got through.'" And there are maybe fifteen of us, twenty, except for this colonel. "Ha. Enough, a bunch of lesbians." And I blew up. I'm at one of the table, he's at the other end. "How in the hell can you say that? They're qualified, they've proved it." And these civilians sitting right--civilians, they're these non-army types, they're listening to this, and right now we're at the point, we may speak to each other, but I made a point to prove, I got a piece of paper that said, not only were they qualified, they've proven that they met the standards, they're doing the job, and he

now, he'll grunt. And my wife accused me of being inappropriate, because I just refuse to talk to him except to say hello. Until he apologizes, something else. But anyhow. They're qualified and that's what we expect, that's what we want them to do. And so, to answer your question, yes, I've faced that, here, we have it, there are five hundred and eighty people here, one, two, three black American families, two, and two s--three wives, spouses, who are here, they're spouses, male or deceased. The other family, Leo Brooks. The name may not mean anything to you, but his son just got promoted to four stars a year and a half ago, and he is doing superbly well. Leo, the father, is retired brigadier, his other son is a retired two-star, one-star, and so they got two sons, one brigadier and one four stars, and they all talk about their two sons, and what they're doing, and other people talk about that, too. And I get irritated, I say, "Wait a minute, hold it. They've got a daughter and she's my lawyer, she's better qualified than they are." Okay. So we have an understanding. If you are going to talk about the Brooks, you'd better talk about Marquita. She is our lawyer and she's doing a fine thing.

DC: Terrific.

JB: And so she has a big law firm downtown, and so. But we have that kind of relationship, here. Interesting enough, I've been here since 2008, and since then, Leo came in two years later, and, amusingly so, he got here because Louise had a luncheon for some general officer wives here, black, and that luncheon rotated around, and Naomi, who is Leo's wife, was in a group. The person in charge of apartments and renting and getting folks in was invited to this luncheon to talk about opportunities to come into the (). And she did a great job. Naomi goes home that night and said, "Leo, we're moving." "We're what?" "Leo, we're moving. I just saw the place." "We're not moving, we can't

afford to move. We're not moving." "Did you hear what I said, Leo? We are moving." And so we've known the Brooks for a long time. Ever since Leo comes here, every time he thinks about it, "I hate you. Talking my wife into moving." She smiles, and so.

DC: That's funny.

JB: You may see him just going by in a wheelchair, neck in a brace, and that is an air force brigadier, injured, severely injured, and his--well, that's the kind of folks we have here. But anyhow, the Brooks are, we're good friends. And their son is just doing a superb job, he's the commander of the Pacific, you can't get much bigger than that. And I'm so happy about it because I knew, I've known him since he was a teenager, as I've done their daughter, who is also [eighteen?], we met them at Fort Hood, and he just, every time something happens good, I feel great.

DC: So there's a real fraternity among--

JB: Oh, there's no question about it. Matter of fact, [1:55:00] when I--when Vince got his promotion to four stars, I had a four-star brace, pin, given to me by a former boss, who gave it to me after I got up and went to three stars, and he said, "I've missed all your promotions, I'm going to have, be there ahead of time. Pin this on when you get promoted." "That's not going to happen." But I kept it. When Vince got promoted to four stars, he pinned on my four stars, I gave him. That kind of relationship we have, we have fun.

DC: That's terrific.

JB: And--I'm trying to figure out where I left off at. In Germany, I think--

DC: Oh, we've gotten up to about 1961.

JB: Okay. Good, good. I went to France, came back from France, and in 1963, I was in France, we were in France, Verdun, France, when Kennedy got shot. And we listened to the old radio. And something which the American people don't realize, that when that happened to our president, every radio station in France started playing music that was appropriate for our death, back here, for our leader. And you could not ask for, be more proud of what, for us, of what they did for us. Okay. I get back from France, go off to the Armed Forces Staff College, down in Norfolk or--yeah, Norfolk, Virginia. Armed Forces, all schools, all services. As was Leavenworth, but primarily army, but other services were there. Armed Forces Staff Colleges teach about each of the services, and to become joint staff officers. Okay? There, the daughter that was born at Fort Benning, living on the post at Armed Forces Staff College, the military used a school in the local community. And we had the only blacks at the Armed Forces Staff College, so when our daughter, in the third grade, riding the bus from the school, that school was just integrated, so she became the first black to go to that school as a student. She was met at the door, when the bus pulled up, by the principal. And he got her off the bus, escorted her into the class, and the teacher was told about who's coming in, and he made sure she got back on the bus, no problems, and that's the way her class went. She was a great student, she did very, very well. She moved from, in the first semester, from being in a third grade, she moved to, advanced to a fourth grade because of what she'd been doing before that. And she continued to have this escort by the principal. It got to the point where we got out of that environment, back into Washington, she felt so, pretty good about herself. She had a principal taking care of her. I'm now in Washington, assigned to Desk Per, the Office for Personnel, the same office as this colonel I'm going

to be talking to later. My first job was dealing with National Guard and Reserve Affairs for the army. It was during that period that the Alabama battle took place, going to the bridge, and the riot--

DC: In Selma?

JB: Rosa Park. The Army Operations Center was made up of, not assigned persons, most of us came from volunteer, people elsewhere, pulled together and worked. My job was to contact the National Guard commander on the ground, and maintain communications for him, with him, for the army staff. The very first night out, the chief of staff wanted to find out, okay, where were the marchers, and what was the army doing protecting it, and where, their deployment. And the general who represented us, with the chief of staff, had no idea, nor did I, but I'm the guy [2:00:00] sitting in the operations center, "Find out." Got that. Get on the phone, I call this army commander, National Guard, he probably was a brigadier general, and I told him who I was, I'm now a lieutenant colonel, said, "This is what we need to know. What is the location of your [cruiser?] weapons, what is the location of the other people? We need to report to the chief of staff." "What the hell do you folks need that for?" I said, "Colonel, I mean, General, I'm only calling. The chief of staff in the army wants to find out. I'd be happy to tell him that you refused to give it to me--" "No, I'll tell you." So he gave me the location of the [cruiser?] weapons, I report that back to the, my boss, the general, he went up and reported it to the chief of staff. Now, we're talking, still, sensitivity of, about race. Because that was what it was about. And my job was to make sure we knew where they were, and how they got there. I then went back to my job as a guy in charge of race, of guards and reservists in the army staff. During the meantime, the army comptroller,

colonel, was an air force--I mean, a colonel from West Point. He was the colonel who taught me, officer who taught me how to shoot crap, as I think I mentioned to you, going over? And he is now a colonel, and now I'm a--yeah, at this time I was a colonel, and we got together quite often. And he'd laugh about it, taking my money, I said, "I'd laugh if I had that, too, because I'm not higher than you." We smiled about that.

I'm back in the Pentagon, as a lieutenant colonel, working hard. I went from there to [Pause] a graduate program that the Department of Defense has started for systems analysts. And that's when they had McNamara Whiz Kids, and they were creating problems for the army. And the army, the military set up a small group of qualified systems analysts. I was selected to go along with five army officers to this class of some thirty-one, thirty-two people off of IDA, Institute for Defense Analyses, they ran the program. I was the senior officer, and so all that meant that I was, I spoke for the army, for the military, in this class, when that was necessary. I'm smiling because, in setting up this group, I got over to this, as a student, because I had been a math major at Prairie View, even though I did not do well in analytical geometry years ago. And economics is a function of math, in many respects, and so I had my math background, I got selected to go to school, went off to school full-time, graduate school run by the University of Maryland, this program, finished there a year later, came back to the army staff, and was assigned to the office as assistant secretary, assistant chief of staff of the army. A group set up to, as some people have said, rewrite what the staff said. Because our hires didn't like what we were giving them, so they rewrote it themselves. That meant that we were required, before it got to them, to make sure it fit the category that they needed. They got--my biggest problem was a particular general, whose widow is

here, and we see her every once in a while and she's a best friend but I said, "You know what your husband did to me?" But anyhow, another story.

We worked at that staff, that group, until it was time to go to Fort Hood as a colonel brigade commander, [2:05:00] which is something we, a lot of folk look forward to doing. Let me back up from that. Before doing that, after leaving this graduate program, I got selected for the National War College, senior service college, the highest schools for any soldiers--army, navy, marines all have their own schools, except the National War College is all of them together. And I went off to that school and was the third black American army to go to the National War College. The first to go there, at that time, was a Roscoe Robinson, who was the first to go to, from West Point, to get the four stars. His wife is here, she is a, sad to say, suffering from dementia and does not recognize anyone. And while I was at the National War College, he had gone off to Hawaii and he sent back and said, "Hey, can you send me a sweat suit? Because my wife put my sweat suit in and it bleached, and I can't recognize it." So I went off, bought one, sent it to him. But, well, now, at the National War College, again, academically, it's a great school, I enjoyed it and did well. I went from the National War College--

DC: Now, what's happening in Southeast Asia at this point? Where, what year are we in?

JB: We're now--1961. I graduated in 1961 from the National War College, and so whatever happening then, it's, we got folks over there. I'm not too sure, back in 1961, it wasn't, I was not involved, and so I got, doing other things. But when I last, when I left the National War College, I went to Fort Hood as a brigade commander, I think I mentioned that, and we transferred, we trained for, very hard. And I enjoyed what

I was doing, I had a good staff and good troops. came over to the Chief of Staff's office. I left there as a lieutenant colonel. Rather important period because I went out to Campbell as a squadron commander in the 101st Airborne Division, which is the--there are two airborne divisions, 82nd and the 101st. And we happen to think that 101st is the best of them. And, on top of that, I was a lieutenant colonel, armor, leaving the National War College, going off to command a squadron, and the, there was only one cav squadron in the division, and only two cav squadrons like that in the army, one, the 82nd, the other, 101st. And now it's time to--and we trained very well, very hard. Now, I'm not, I was not airborne qualified. I got airborne qualified when I left the armed forces staff, because I went to Jump School and qualified as a paratrooper. You remember, I said when I'm on a pole, I don't like heights?

DC: Yeah.

JB: Why do you jump off airplanes? It's a challenge, that's why I did it.

DC: So you were continually training, even through all these--

JB: Well, that's right. Hey, that's what we're all about. But I'm now airborne qualified. On the Command A Armored Unit, I spent most of my time as infantry except with the 2nd Army Division, I was in armor infantry but not in an armor unit as such. Never commanded a tank unit, never even fired a tank gun. But I go off to the 101st Airborne Division. We trained hard, Vietnam. I am the only black commander in the division at that level, no other battalion commanders. We had one black colonel, and he commanded the trainings, logistics. Went off to Vietnam, did very well. Battalion squadron commander for the first part of my tour, and then the last part of my tour, I was deputy brigade commander [2:10:00] and I had a chance to meet some very important

people. As a squadron commander during the war, I got visited by a fellow named Creighton Abrams. Military assistant commander, MACV, in Vietnam. I was the only armor unit in his area, in that area. And when he came out, he came to visit me. He'd land his chopper, get out, flew them, come over and sit on the jeep. "Okay, Julie, what have you done now?" And I'd talk to him about what we're doing, how well we're doing and so forth. Got a great relationship, which proved to be very important later on.

Fought the war, got a couple of citations, medals and stuff like that, came back to the States, assigned to the army staff, again, as a colonel. I get promoted to brigadier general, and assigned to Fort Dix, New Jersey. Now the interesting part about that, Fort Dix is not too far from Philadelphia. I am now the deputy commander of Fort Dix. My job is to--to, really, to be the guy in charge of training the post commanders in jobs, everything else. And I had, we worked very hard, drill sergeant worked for me. And I had a superb boss. Early on, he asked me to--not asked me. Sent me to Washington, to convince the army not to close Fort Dix, during the phase-down. And the folks in the army determined to close it, and our argument was, "This is the major training center in the whole northeastern part of the United States, where parents send their youngsters to go in the army, train there, now you're going to close it?" And I had beat up by a fellow named Rizzo, from Philadelphia, the mayor, "You go down and tell them they can't close it because we need it." All [on account of my?] civilians who live, work at Fort Dix. What are you going to do if you close it? I'm a brigadier--I'm not a colonel--brigadier general, rather, and I go to Washington and try to explain, and, "Becton, we hear what you're saying, now go back and go do your job." "Yes, sir." Go back to Fort Dix, I tell my boss, Bert David, he tells everyone else that. So what do they do? They turn the

politicians loose. And guess what? Fort Dix is still open today, is it not? When the politicians get involved, sometimes good things happen. Training's no longer there, but Fort Dix is still open. Anyhow.

At Fort Dix, I'm deputy commander. We worked very hard, my boss, Bert David, gets transferred to Washington, to logistics. His replacement comes in, is a guy who got promoted to maj-- to brigadier general at the same time I did. But in the meantime, he'd gotten promoted to two stars. Now he's my boss. I'd been there about a year when he got there, so I know most of the people, everybody, and everybody knows me, and he's incoming. So when, although he's the commander and I'm still a deputy, when things happen, who did they come see? I'm the stuckee, okay, fine, I understand that. Time moves on for--he'd been there for about six months, and the two-star list comes out, major general, and I get promoted to major general. Now, he doesn't fuss about that but he does say, "Okay, I'll get rid of him now." Because the job I'm filling is that of a brigadier, not of a two-star. I'm still there, and no one tells me where I'm going to go. I stay at Fort Dix for about six months as a two-star, and he's a two-star. A little bit discomfort on his part. [2:15:00] Because he wanted to be the sole guy in charge, when I'm not in--I'm not trying to fuss him, or cause a problem. But when people come in, I get to be the guy. His two sons got in a problem one day, the [pro marshal?] come see me. "Don't see me, go see him. This one's not mine." No, but--okay. I now get orders, I get promoted to two stars in August, and I'm still sitting at Fort Dix. And I went for about three months before I find out what I'm going to do. I find out I'm going to go to Fort Hood as a division commander. Now, why am I shocked by that? Because I'm going to command an armored division, and I'm also going to go--when you got a lot of

other two stars who want that job, because this army division is being converted from a triple-capability division to a pure army division. My army experience is not very much. My boss at Fort Dix wanted a division, but he got a training center. Big difference between those two. Two-star () but I'm going to a division and he is stuck there. And so, okay. I find out, in the final analysis, that Creighton Abrams, the fellow I said came out to visit and so forth, four-star, had deceased. And he has written notes, "Becton gets the armored division, 1st Cav." And it went into the record that way.

And so, now, I am heading off to Fort Hood to command a division. However, when I'm leaving Fort Dix, my boss wrote the worst report card I'd ever gotten, OER. "Becton is great at dealing with the civilians, great at dealing with community affairs, great at dealing with other things. He is horrible in training. No training discipline whatsoever." I've already left the training, I've been--okay. I'm down at Fort Hood, going to take command of a division, and this report card goes up the chain. And when I get to Fort Hood, I've been in command of the division maybe two weeks. And oh, by the way, I'm the only, there are only two black division commanders at that time. And we communicate with each other. Harry Brooks, who was out in Hawaii, 25th Division, when I got the 1st Cav division, the--I had three superb battalion commanders, brigade commanders. My chief of staff of the division happens to be also a resident here, today. Well, I never knew the guy before, but he did a fine job and I was happy with him, and he's now a four-star, I might add, how he got there is no story, but we have a great time around here. I get the--at Hood we did a lot of hard training, spent a lot of time in the field, trying some new concepts. Worked and worked and worked, and it's time, now--been there for about two years, race relations during that period, we're talking in the

community, is--took command in 1976, of the division, and in 1978--well, let me back up a little bit. Early 1976, early--yeah, 1976, early 1976, January. And it's--my wife's having a good time, the family's having a good time, the fourth child has been born, I mean, fifth child, the son, the one I mentioned, he is on active duty. Everything's right with the world. It's time for me to be transferred, and my, I lived next door to the corps commander, he calls me up, said--oh, interesting [2:20:00] story. When I took command of the division, I replaced the guy who became the corps commander. But we knew each other as brigadiers, so he's a good guy. And as we prepare for my taking command of the division, he said, "Okay. When you get here, Julius, we're going to have a change of command, mount a--count, command chain, mounted change of command, and we're going to troop the line, mounted, and then you take command." "Bob--his name--hey, look. My experience riding a horse is not all that great, and I've been trained here, at Fort Hood, how to ride a horse because my--you know your wife taught me how to do that, she's a great horseman--but why don't you march on a horse and I stay on the stand, and then when I'm in charge it'll go back to an armor division? Armor divisions don't ride horses." "Okay. We'll do it that way." And then before I get there, I get word who's going to be my boss. He could be my boss. He called me up again, "Julius, guess what. I guess I should tell you I'm going to be the corps commander. And on the subject of change of command, this is how we're going to do it." And you see a book, a picture of me on the back of a horse, and when you get to the (), stuff like that. But. We go through this--

DC: You survived it, yeah.

JB: Yeah. I moved from that division to a place in Springf--outside in Bailey's Crossroads, OTEA, Army Operational Test and Evaluation Agency. Our job is to test all army equipment and concepts. In the hands of soldiers, what happens when soldiers put their hands on it? Does it still work. Of course, there's no one else that looks like me in that job, I have close ties with my counterpart in the air force and the marine corps, each of them have such a unit. My technician, a civilian, a real engineer, Walt Hollis, when I get there, he's been there forever. And when I walk in he said, "Congratulations General, glad to have you here. May we talk?" "Sure." "Okay. I'll support you any way I can. One thing I expect. If I make a decision or make a recommendation and go before the Congress and you change that, don't expect me to not tell them what I think." "Walt, I understand that. Because I'm not going to make any decisions that you don't agree with." He said, "Okay, fine." And that's the relationship that we had. We tested the M1 tank, the new tank--not new, it was new then--Abrams tank, at that unit. The program manager for that tank is also a resident here.

DC: This is quite a collection of people, here.

JB: He'd take great delight in telling people how I had him do this, had him do that. We got a good tank out, didn't we? Okay. No, sir, but I'm now, I'm ov--at that unit, doing very well. It's now 1977, going into 1978, and I get orders and a promotion to three stars. Then I get invited to--invited, I'm told to come over to the chief of staff, we had a long conversation, did not know what the job was going to be, but I was told you get promoted to three star, but there are a couple of billets I could go to. And I end up by getting the largest combat corps in the army. Combat corps in the army, in Europe, VII Corps. Our job was to be, take the lead if the Russians crossed the border. And, hell,

I'm just as happy as I could be, ready to go. From a racial standpoint, there are no other black corps commanders. The announcement of my being a corps--that corps commander was held up an extra several months while the army told a USRA commander, who then told a German that "A Lieutenant [2:25:00] General Becton is coming in as commander of the VII Corps--and oh, by the way, he's a black American," to see how they took to it. Didn't bother them, and so that was done. I get over there and--oh. I go, no, I think you'll find amusing.

While I'm getting ready to go to Germany, you're required to go to language school if you're going to go to a language that you don't speak. And while I'm in, my language training in German was delayed because they didn't want to make the announcement, I'm going to be the corps commander, the German corps commander, until I could get the language in. And I couldn't do that until I went to school. And so, while I'm in school, I am learning how to speak German. I spend my entire time--most of my time--preparing my remarks for when I get there, because you have to go through that. And I had German in Muhlenberg--matter of fact, I became the president of the German American club because I was doing so well in German--and as I'm preparing my remarks, going from English to German to English to German, and by the time I got to Germany, I had that down pat. At the change of command, I was on the platform, German press, German public, soldiers out in the field in front of me, and I went through that spiel about using Deutsch and English, going from English to Deutsch, back and forth, for about fifteen minutes. And when I finished, so proud of myself, I got off the platform, parade's over, I'm beset upon by the press. Guess what they're speaking? They're not speaking English, they're speaking German. And I'm prepared to--from my

remarks, prepared. And I flubbed it, big time. And, of course, I made it very clear. They understood what I was faced with, what I had done. And I made it very clear. Whenever I went to talk to any group in the future, I never attempted to speak German. Because--I could make it, I could say, "Guten Tag," and "Auf Wiedersehen," and stuff like that, but no conversation.

But once I took command of the corps, we had a great, three great divisions. One commanded by a guy who was a very good friend of mine who had been on my, we had been classmates together, he was one of the division commanders. He retired as a four-star, I might add. The other was a very good friend, infantry, he was a 3rd Infantry Division. And I had a division back here, in the 1st Infantry Division, out in Colorado, but they would have joined us if war broke out, so I had two divisions, an armored cav unit, cavalry unit to do reforger--re-do the covering forests, and relation--doing the thing what cavalry normally does, and as I joined this corps, the deputy, my deputy is a fellow named George Patton. George and I had a great relationshi--an interesting relationship. Back when I was in Vietnam, George had a regiment and I had a squadron. But he had a different area, and when Abrams would come out and see me, it irritated George to no end because I'm getting all the attention. Okay. George moves up, he gets promoted to brigadier general, and he goes off to Fort Knox and becomes the assistant combatant. In the meantime, I become the branch chief while he's there. When I left the brigade and went back to Washington, I became Armor Branch Chief, in charge of the assignment of all armor officers. That shocked people, too. I'd never been to Fort Knox as a school, I'd never had a great deal of experience dealing with assignments. I did have the support of the guy who sent me there from Fort Hood, and I had the support of the staff in the

Pentagon, and I became branch chief, and it irritated George Patton to no end. Because he's sitting up there at Fort Knox, in charge of all armor officers' school, I'm in charge of their assignments. And normally the branch chief gets invited to the branch school to talk to the students. Patton, hell no. "Damned not an armor graduate, [2:30:00] not a--never been to Knox, why should I invite him here?" "Okay, George, that's your business, sir." So I'm fine, I'm happy with that. I now go to Fort Hood as a division commander, and he comes in, command of the 2nd Armored Division, we good, get along well together, and I had done my job, he'd done his job. I go from there to the ICAP, to the OTEA, training, testing unit, George goes to Germany and becomes the deputy commander, VII Corps. Time moves on, I come in as his new commander. George comes in, "Boss, glad you're here. Support you in any way I can. You tell me to do something, I'll do it." "George, the only thing I'm going to tell you is, just do your job. You know what it is, you've been here, I have not been here before, you understand what's to be done, got it." And we worked together quite well. He never said, "Sir," one time. "Boss," always.

Okay. This is now October, November, December. George comes in and says, "Boss, I like the way you're doing things but I'd like to send my family home." "Okay, fine." In the meantime, oh, and right before that, he said, "I'd like to go--be transferred back to--" no, no. Yeah. He said, "I'd like to do, I think I'll transfer back to the States, if that's okay with you." I called my boss at Heidelberg, United States Army Europe commander, the same fellow who was a company commander, student company commander, when I was at Fort Benning, Blanchard, and the same guy who commanded the 82nd Airborne Division when I was getting started with the 1st Cav. And he's now

the four-star in charge of Europe. "Sir, George wants to go home." "Good." "Okay." I go back and tell Patton, "The boss said okay." "Fine."

And then we have an exercise, reforger, return the forces to Germany, which is an exercise proving that we can move forces from continental limits of the United States to Germany, form their prepositioned equipment, and fight the war. That's George's big in charge of, back in the VII Corps, the equipment. There was a reforger exercise, and now we're going to have field operations, reforger unit come in from Colorado, George is in charge of corps [rear?], and some other administrative things, and the equipment that the incoming troops fall in on, and I'm out fighting the training battle. We get along superbly well. However, one minor thing. This is being done in February, this exercise. George's family is back in the States, and the weather turned, like it is today, no frozen ground--this is unusual for us, this weather's unusual for us in Germany, back in those days--and the weather turned warm. And I got hundreds of tanks out in the field, tearing up German property. And we decided we could, just got to stop this. So we're going to cancel, we're going to terminate. And I checked that with my boss, he agreed, and I said, "Okay, I will announce the fact that we're going to terminate." And Blanchard said, "No, I'm the USAR commander, I will take care of that." And all of a sudden a fellow named Al Haig flies in. You may remember, I mentioned Haig was a graduate of my high school? He flies in and lands, "Hell, I guess I'll make the announcement, then." It is not Becton, our corps commander, it is not the four-star USAR commander, but the Supreme Allied Commander Europe is going to make this announcement. "Okay."

In the meantime, we're out, talking, while the troops are doing what they normally do, and the staff thinks that we're talking tactics. We weren't talking tactics,

we're talking [2:35:00]--Al Haig was telling me, when he was in high school, he got kicked out of school, being caught for smoking, and the principal told his mother, "You will never become anything." And so, hey--I mean, Al Haig got promoted pretty good. And that's what we're talking about, and we became, stayed friends until he died. Okay.

The weather turned warm, exercises cancelled, we did a lot of damage to the German real estate, tore up the crop. Big property damage, and we had our units back to the field, back to their locations, trying not to tear up the Germany streets because the streets are no longer frozen, and you've got tanks going over, and a tank will do severe damage to anything. We got back and recovered, and I liked the way George operated so well, George came in to see me. "Sir, I'd like to stay with you, I like the way you operate." You remember that word I said, "Sir?" First time he'd ever use that word, ever, when he asked to stay on. "Sure, I'll let you stay here. Let me call Blanchard." I called Blanchard, "Sir, George wants to stay here." "Hell, no, he's going home." "Oh, okay." I go back and tell George. "George, USAR commander said no." "Hmm. Okay." So, he goes off and doing his thing. In the meantime, I start getting in replacements for him. My very first one came in when George was leaving. He was off at the officers' club, at the club in Stuttgart, and spent the night, his family's going home, and the next morning, I, my staff, other major commanders, and the band comes out to play, welcome him, farewell. The one thing that George really resented more than anything else, when he was division commander, was the "Garryowen," which is our 1st Cav Division song, cavalry song. And guess what song the band played? George walked down the steps, "What?!" And I almost died because they were about to--I couldn't do anything about it, and I never told the bandmaster, "Don't play that," I thought--well,

never mind. () I thought. He gunned his car, and vroom, driver drove off. Maddier than hell. And it took me some time to ov--recover that, after he got back to the States, but I tried to explain to him, "We didn't, I didn't arrange for that."

DC: Did he, he thought that--

JB: He thought I did it. So I stayed on as corps commander, the Russians never attacked, we were prepared, we worked very hard. And when it came time to come home, I came home to training and doctrine command, located at Fort Monroe, Virginia. I was the deputy commander, the only black American at that level. Jack Merritt, my chief of staff from the division, in the meantime, had gone from that position to two-star at Fort Sill as the commander, from that position to the director of the army, the joint staff, a three-star billet. And from that position, he went to Europe to work, to be a representative for the ambassador and the NATO forces, and became a four-star. And so, while he is doing that--he's a three-star now, excuse me, jumping ahead. He's three-star, and I'm at two--he's at Fort Leavenworth, as the deputy commander for training and doctrine command at Leavenworth, and I'm the deputy commander for training at Monroe. He's in charge of all officer training, and I'm in charge of all training centers. I point that out because the relationship that we have, he left there and then became the four-star at, in Brussels. I'm back at the Monroe three-star billet. I not only become the deputy commander for training and doctrine command, I become the army inspector for training, a new position that the chief of staff of the army want to try out. And now, not only am I in charge of training, but I'm also in charge of units in the field, training.

[2:40:00] And which means, I get a chance to mark up not only the training that I, that we conduct for our soldiers, but also how well they've been doing that. And I get the chance

to inspect them, the units. That also irritated a few folks because they'd never had one of these before, until I got that job, until I was told to do that. Again, racial standpoint, by that time there are three lieutenant generals: Roscoe Robinson, () as a four-star, Art Gregg, who is now the J1 in the joint staff, and then the commander [Pause] he went to the three-star at the chief, in the army staff, at the G4, three-star billet. Okay? Roscoe gets promoted, Art and I stay in our three-star billets. And I stay at that job until I retire. Some interesting things took place during that time. I had a chance to represent the army in some interesting positions that required dealing with the public. I might add, before that, I dealt with a mission to deal with the National Guard. Now I'm dealing with the, what takes place in the field at the highest level, but only as a lieutenant general.

I retire from the Army in August of 1983, and move into a civilian activity, but still as a retired lieutenant general. Looking for a job as a retired lieutenant general was eas--was not as easy as I thought because, when I talked to corporations, I don't have any experience at the corporation level. I certainly don't have a--I'm still a, I got a masters, but so what? I've commanded many units on the ground, but industry someti--at that time, were not interested in soldiers, what they could do. I finally get a job, AID, Agency for International Development, and become the director of disaster assistance, that the United States government has for helping other countries when they have major problems. I am now the guy in charge of that. Okay. I did that job from January of 1984 to the summer of 1985. And during that period, we, I had quite a few disaster--major disasters overseas, my biggest one was the famine in Africa, and we provided major support there, and I became the guy in charge of that support, from all agencies, going, providing the support. Racial thing. The ambassador from South Africa came over to

request assistance, and the agency director for AID, “Sure, go down and see Colonel, General Becton, he’ll take care of you.” And I told my secretary, “This is going to be amusing.” Facetiously I said that. The guy walks in to report to me, the director, to ask for assistance for the African support. He took one look at me, “Uh-oh, I forgot something,” and he went out. And left. And I called my boss at AID and said, “I think we got a problem, I don’t think we’re going to see him back here.” We didn’t, because the last thing he expected to see was a black American in that position, to provide support for him. Because I would have provided the support, but it would have been, he would have gotten an earful about what I think about what his country is doing, from a racial standpoint. You may remember those days, apartheid was high.

I stayed in AID, [2:45:00] we had a lot of interesting work going on. I did the job quite well. The agency, Federal Emergency Management Agency, FEMA, it’s the highest level in the government for providing support for the country. And I had made contact with some interesting people when I had that job in AID. One, the vice president, because of what we did for other countries. Two, a fellow named Gore, who was then a senator from Tennessee. And a couple representatives on the staff, the congressional staff. And when it came time for me to go into FEMA with no political support, I had to get somebody to support me. And I had the vice president, spoke on my behalf, Gore came over and spoke on my behalf, and several other people. I went through with no sweat at all, and I became the director of FEMA. Most interesting because I had a staff of political appointees, and the last thing they expected to see was a soldier coming in, who had no political background as such. I said, “Guys, hey, I’m going to do the job. I’m here to help you, you to help me. Anything you can do and you think that I’m not

doing it right, tell me about it, I'll be the first to listen to you." And we got along very fairly. As a matter of fact, interesting enough, we just got Christmas cards from three of those political appointees this week, that's a long time ago. Anyhow, we go along to FEMA, and we now have all kinds of challenges. Floods--I was there less than a week when a major flood took place in northern Virginia, not too far from here. And I got Warner called, "I want this kind of support." Well, my job was to advise the president whether the damage is sufficient that we should provide the support that they're asking for. And so I got Warner, came in the helicopter using National Guard, Virginia National Guard chopper, we went up, took a look at the flood, it's pretty bad. I mean, it was really bad. Came back, landed, I made my report to the president, approving the recommendations from the state that they should have a declaration of disaster. And that went through. And of course, from that time on, any time a major disaster occurred, I would be the one who had to recommend to the president, yes or no. Sometimes we said no, sometimes we said yes, based upon what my staff told me. Because they're the experts, they're out there on the ground. Now, FEMA did not go out and do the work themselves. FEMA's an organization that collaborates, coordinates, makes contacts. But we have nobody that can go out and dig a ditch or do anything else, we just had the contacts, and we also controlled those folks on the ground. And so I spent, from that time until 1989 as the director of FEMA. Thoroughly enjoyed it, had good contact, made good relations.

And then, an interesting thing occurred. The governor of--while I was at FEMA, the governor of New Hampshire, guy named Sununu, got very irritated with the way that we were trying to support his installation of nuclear power plants. And we were

responsible for--not putting the plant in, but providing the security for that plant. And so we exercised that. And my staff were not satisfied with the way they were doing it, so we did not approve it. And he went blitzy--ballistic.

DC: Thought you were meddling with his plan?

JB: Oh. He came down one day, into my office, and demanded that I change it. "Governor, I hear what you're saying but we're not going to do it until these things are done." "I'm going to the White House." "Be my guest, sir." He started off to the White House, and they said nothing to me because they knew what I was doing. And oh, by the way, while I was director of FEMA, I saw the president probably less than a half a dozen times. I didn't take the papers over to him in person, my contact with the White House [2:50:00] presented my recommendation to the chief of staff there, and they talked about, then up to the president. It wasn't me going in front of the president, saying, "This is it." Sununu went over and apparently did the same thing, but didn't get anywhere.

Okay. Now, George Bush becomes president of the United States. Who did he select for his vice--chief of staff? John Sununu. Because his political influence in New Hampshire, and the importance of New Hampshire is to the Republicans, and Sununu now becomes the exec--to the pre--chief of staff to the president. And he had made it clear, if he ever got a chance to do something to me, he would do it, Sununu. It became very clear that his first action would be, I'm out of FEMA. Now, the president didn't step in and stop him. But George Bush did something very interesting. He called me and said, "Would you like to be ambassador?" "Sir, yes, sir." And I went home, told my wife, and she was not happy about that because she'd spent enough time being a potted plant, as she says, standing around the corner as a commander and everyone else is going

on. Now I'm becoming an ambassador? And I'm at home listening to this. I get a call, after I'm no longer director of FEMA. Bush did not stop him from, Sununu, from changing me from being director of FEMA, but he did make it possible for me to become an ambassador. Because that would not bother Sununu. I get a call. "Julius, the president-elect has had to change his mind. A friend of his in the Congress got defeated, Ed Derwinski, and he can no longer put you in the job of being, working for the administration, where he was going to put you. And that's when the subject came about, who would take over FEMA. Sununu said you've got to go. And I get the call that, after Bush wanted me to go to become an ambassador, that this guy got selected, and he was a failure in the job that followed me, in FEMA. And I could have predicted that, a lot of people could have predicted that, but politics being what they are. And so--

DC: And the ambassador position got taken off the table?

JB: I got taken off the--no, my wife took me off that. Because, when I got the call about going and becoming ambassador to Hawaii--to Caribbean, we're not going down there. "Hell no, we're not going." My wife doesn't swear often, but she said, "We're not going to go down there." And I told the guy who was telling me this. "Okay, we understand." And that terminated my relationship with the White House, and...

DC: That was it, right.

JB: And that was it, and that's when I became a civilian, happy with what I was doing, I was--been there not very long before I get this call about, "Would you be interested in helping us out? School system. District of Columbia." And I had assumed they wanted me to come down and talk about a board, because they're trying to set up a board to take over, get in new, running things. And as the--you might remember, there

was a time when the government was controlled by a control board. And the control board is the one that controls the school system. And they're the ones that were calling me, and I thought they wanted me to become part of a board to run the school. As they were describing to me the situation, one of the members said, "Now, when you get there--" "Whoa, time out. What do you mean when I get there?" "Oh, we want you to become superintendent. Didn't we tell you that?" "I thought you said, run to be a part of the board." "No, superintendent." "Okay." I said, "Well, hmm. Let me go home and see how it works out." As I'm driving home in my car, I call my wife, say, "Guess what. I've been offered a job as superintendent." We'd moved from [2:55:00] Washington, our home there, out to Springfield, we got great relationships with the neighbors and everything else, and my wife said, "Two conditions. Don't bring your anger home, and we're not moving." I said, "Okay, I can handle that." And when I got to the schools, I made it very clear. No matter what they say, we're not moving from Virginia. I know what the rules are, but if you want me as the superintendent, I'm staying here. This is an emergency, you said, I'm staying here. The control board understood that. I stayed on, in northern Virginia, Springfield, and stayed on, got into the school system. Now, keep in mind the only school training I've had, in school, was the university president. Which is not all bad, but being university president is a lot different than running a school. Also, I had a system in which the--we're running out of money, we're--and made enemies with the mayor who was under contr--a fellow named Marion Barry, you may have heard that name. He was the mayor, but he had lost control because the control board is in. And when he'd go before the congress, for sch--money, I've got to go for the schools. Not the mayor.

DC: Right. So you come in at a real time of crisis.

JB: Say again?

DC: You came in at a time of crisis.

JB: Yes, I did.

DC: Yes. For the city. And for the school.

JB: Matter of fact, he had a few challenges too. He spent time in jail, he had a few other things too. But I got along with the mayor fine, up until a point. When he started getting into my business, and I said, "Mr. Mayor, that's not your job. This is my job." "I'm the mayor." "Well, fine, but I'm still the superintendent. You want to control that, go to the control board." "Grr." I got through that, and come, had some challenges in the school system. After being there for about eighteen months, my family had a caucus. And they said, "Dad, Julius,"--my wife--"we're tired. We're tired of seeing the name, Becton, in the press, we're tired of seeing the beat-up you're taking in the press, we're tired of this, we're tired of that--you're retired. Why don't you give it up?" And being a practical man as I am, was to understand that I'm in trouble if I stay home. "Okay." I report into the control board, and to the media, "I'm going to go home and become a private citizen." "Why are you leaving?" The press said. "Hey, you see what I've been faced with. You know what I've done, and what I'm faced with, but I got problems at home and I'm just going to--I'm tired, and I want to go home and enjoy it." I think I have brought you up to date. I don't think I've covered that much time--

[Laughter]

DC: That was wonderful. Let me ask just one final question?

DC: And this isn't so much a specific question, as to ask you to comment about--because I was struck, in your incredible life story, you know, the number of times that you were the first, or one of a very few. And if you could just sort of comment about a life led like that.

JB: Well, I've been told that many times and I've thought about it, too. I've had a lot of help, I'll be the first to admit. One is from the fellow upstairs, and I would talk to that. I've always complained about the help I had with my ankle being shot up and missed the ankle tendon and a bone, and other things in combat. And some battles I've had in the political arena. But I try to be very practical in what I'm doing. I have a very supportive family, they make it d--they've made moves that I think, if I was a youngster being moved as much as they have, to enough different schools they're going to, I'd have been pretty upset. They dealt with that. Financially, the jobs I had were not all that rewarding, money-wise. FEMA, and working for the AID, I received no retirement pay. As a three-star general. Why? Something--and I went to FEMA, dual compensation. I cannot draw the salary that a director would get, and keep retired pay. Because the federal government has a rule, you cannot be paid [3:00:00] by the federal government for two jobs. One retired, one (). That's to be changed, by the way, since then. So we're not making a lot of money. And when I finally left FEMA, I was able to get a couple boards. During that period, I've gotten--I end up by joining four corporate boards. First one was Illinois Tool Works, down in headquarters in Illinois, and a fellow named Jack Vessey, former director of, former chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, former division commander, and a good friend, called me and said, "Julius. How would you like to be on a board?" "Come on, Jack, I'm on a--I've got enough boards

now.” “This one pays money.” “Oh, now that’s different.” That one, the second board, Wackenhut, you may have heard about them, security. Fellow named P.X. Kelley, marine corps commandant, called me and said, “Hey, we need you down here. There’s a position down here, they’ve never had a black on the board before, we want you to come down to be on the board.” “They pay money?” “Sure.” “Okay.” I joined Wackenhut. Next one I’m on, Military Spill Response Corporation. They’re the agency that was being formed to deal with floods, when a ship has a problem with spills, the big spill that took place down in the gulf, MS, Military Spill Response Corporation. My contact was there when I was at TRADOC as the deputy commander, the coast guard on the coast, commander, was a retired vice admiral, and he was now the president of this new organization, Military Spill Response Corporation, and “Sure, I’ll come out there, Jack. You pay money, I’ll be there.” And the last one was something called GD, General Dynamics. And I got a call one day, from a fellow named Jack Merritt, that name ring a bell again?

DC: Mm-hmm.

JB: And another civilian whose name I cannot think of right now, they were on GD boards. And they were looking for, they’d never had a minority, and they had a vacancy. “How would you like to join us?” “Jack, if you say so and it pays real money, I’d be happy to.” I joined that board. GD, Wackenhut, Marine Spill Response Corporation, and [Pause] I’ve already recalled four.

DC: Yeah, you got it, but I, yeah.

JB: General Dynamics, Wackenhut, Marine Spill Response Corporation--it’ll come to my mind pretty soon. But we were sitting in tall cotton, financially speaking. I

was able, very quickly, to pay off my house, I was in the position to go out and buy two cars, one for myself, one for my wife. Pay it in cash. And what else can you--I mean, I'm in tall--my kids are in school, enjoying what they're doing. We're just having a great time. And you think back, and all those positions, I was the first black American at the corporation, each of the corporations. First black American to be a corps commander, certainly the first black to become the army inspector of training. I was not the first black general for the division commander, but the second or third, in that group. And it's something that we were aware of. I mean "we," because the family's involved. But I don't lord it over everyone's head because I know I was lucky, I was fortunate to be in the position at the right time. But so what? I think that doing that, I had those jobs, I demonstrated that a black American could get the job done. To me, that was the most important thing. And we worked very hard. When we knew that we're under a microscope, people are looking at what we're doing, every time we did, stepped out of line, we knew it. And somebody told us about it. We knew--don't try and do it again.

DC: That's a lot to carry.

JB: What choice did I have? Go home and sit, and drink myself into a stupor, and not enjoy what I was doing? I enjoyed what I was doing. And I was good at what I did, and I had good friends. And one interesting thing, we're working on our, my ninetieth birthday [3:05:00] party in June, and I've been told, "You just pay for it, but be there. And we'll take care of everything else." And so right now, they're working on who's going to, who they're going to invite, and many of the people that are being invited are the same ones I worked with--whether it's in the army, whether it's in the corporation, or whoever. Even a couple folk from here. Because we developed a

relationship with these folks. It's important to me. People-to-people is something which I think I do well. We're sitting in this room right now because the administrator, deputy administrator, when I saw him this morning, "I need a place." "You got this." "Hey, I was told you're the--is--" "No, you got it, you stay here as long as you want." When the Fairfax want to get a radio announcement made, I got to be the stuckee. Well, I do that. You may have heard it over the radio, about, advertising about the Fairfax. And I went down to a radio station, NBC, with the woman who's in charge of that, and housing, and matter of fact, I did it, and I'd heard the tape, I never heard the broadcast. And one of my friends called me one day, "Hey, I just heard you on the radio." "You did? What'd it sound like?" [Laughter] And I got calls from all over the country, people who heard it, until finally my wife heard it on the radio, not just from a tape. So it's that kind of relationship that we have. The *ARMY* Magazine, you probably have never seen it, but it's a monthly publication put out by the Association of the United States Army, in which a fellow named Jack Merritt was the first publisher, the second publisher was a fellow named--certain--first president, the second one was a fellow named Gordon Sullivan, these names ring a bell? And these are people that I worked with all my life, that we have a very good relationship. And I was asked--there was an article published, which I still have never seen it published, the writer, yet, but talking about my efforts back in, on the Pusan Perimeter, and the breakout, going to 201, and how, what we did, made the push through for the division to get on to where we ended up by doing. And I didn't do a lot except lead my unit, they thought that I led the charge. So they published that, and the first time I heard about it was when a friend down in Texas, "Hey, congratulations." "What the hell are you talking about?" "You haven't see the *ARMY* Magazine?" "No, I

haven't." "You ought to take a look, page nineteen." There is my picture, and the story of what I--they said I thought I had done. Those are the kinds of things which make me feel pretty good about what I've done. So when I finally go into the great beyond, I think I've done everything I could do to help myself, my family, and not just race, but also the country. Does that answer your question?

DC: That is a perfect place--yes, it answers my question, and it's a perfect, I think, note to end on, so.

JB: Great.

DC: That just leaves me to thank you very much. For your service, and for your time.

JB: Well, I've had fun doing what I'm doing, because when I get to the point where I cannot have fun, I stop doing it. And if you read in the--that book I have, I got a philosophy of command, some thirteen points. Maintain your sense of humor. And if I can't do that, I'm in the wrong job.

DC: That's the most important, yeah.

JB: Okay? I enjoyed it.

DC: Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Female1: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

END OF RECORDING

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, March 23, 2017